TAPPEI
NAGATSUKI
ILLUSTRATION BY
SHINICHIROU
OTSUKA
14
Re:ZeRo
-Starting Life in Another World-

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A Parade of Demon Beasts and Two Sisters

The Old Days

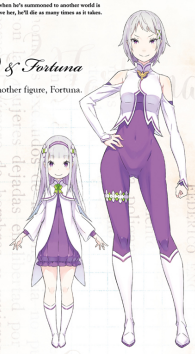
Characters

Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-

The only ability Subaru Natsuki gets when he's summoned to another world is time travel via his own death. But to save her, he'll die as many times as it takes.

Emilia (as a child) & Fortuna

Young Emilia and her mother figure, Fortuna.



Geuse

An individual supporting Fortuna and her kin. Gets along extremely well with Fortuna.

Pandora

The Witch of Vanity.
Her most distinctive feature is her platinum hair.
Possesses inhuman beauty.

Archi

A youth from the elven village who acts like an older brother to Emilia.

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Re:ZeRo

-Starting Life in Another World-

VOLUME 14

TAPPEI NAGATSUKI
ILLUSTRATION: SHINICHIROU OTSUKA

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CHAPTER 1

—JOURNEY OF MEMORIES

1

—Memories came rushing back.

The beginning felt far, far away.

"—I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

A sobbing voice was apologizing.

Tormented by sorrow, the voice begged for forgiveness out of an unendurable sense of guilt.

"Why?" she recalled asking the voice.

"—Because I left you all alone."

"You did?"

"—Because all this time, I couldn't find you."

"But I'm right here?"

She wanted to tell that tearful, grieving voice something.

She wanted to explain there was no reason to say sorry or be so upset.

That's why, in place of those things, there is something I want you to tell me.

"What's…your name?"

"My name is…"

In the past, she had seen this dream over and over.

The end of the dream was swallowed up by light; it was a dream she'd had over and over, time and time again, never hearing what came next—

To her, knowing how that dream ended and finding her family was the beginning of everything.

—But the memories that reappeared went even further into the past than those frozen bonds.

Bit by bit, bit by bit, she retraced her steps, deeper and deeper into her past, which had been sealed away—

2

Surrounded by tall trees, Emilia calmly advanced down an almost nonexistent path, carrying an unshakable sense that she'd been here before.

Stepping across the carpet of grass, she took care to avoid the flowers hidden in the shadows of the trees as she pressed forward. Feeling the hard soil through the soles of her shoes, Emilia tilted her head in confusion. It was a mystifying feeling.

After all, this was the inside of a dream, an imaginary world based on the recollections of a homeland that slept in Emilia's memories.

"But I can smell the wind here and feel the soil… Somehow, it's *really* mysterious, huh?"

"

“Wow.”

Emilia had removed her shoes as a helpful demonstration, but Echidna simply flashed a cold smile. The Witch touched a nearby tree to show how her hand could now pass right through its thick trunk. In a similar fashion, her feet phased through the grassy ground that had given her such trouble earlier.

Emilia’s eyes went wide at this apparent violation of the laws of nature.

“Concerning your earlier, uncouth questions, referring to this as a dream world is nothing more than a figure of speech. To be precise, this is a dimension more accurately described as an alternate plane of existence that resides solely within the mind, replaying the memories of the person undertaking the Trial. Since it reproduces your experiences, is it not natural for this place to have color, shape, and taste?”

“I don’t really get it, but…does that mean if I go on a rampage, the forest will get messed up real bad?”

“That is truly a thought befitting an uncivilized Witch. However, what you are imagining is impossible. Right now, you are a being half a step removed from this world, meaning you are unable to interfere on a level sufficient enough to affect it. Nor can you make contact with the people within the memory. Though, I suppose if you could, it would be a Trial in a different sense.”

“Hmm… And what sense would that be?”

“Instead of asking endless questions, why not try using your own head for a change? Or perhaps that is too much to ask of you, a spoiled child used to getting whatever you desire.”

Echidna snorted in a scornful manner as she phased out her presence more and slipped effortlessly through the forest. Even though she was being mocked for her ignorance, Emilia chided herself, because the Witch’s words rang true.

If she did nothing but ask questions, it was a sign she couldn’t help but depend on others. She needed to do more thinking for herself—

“I thought about it, but I still don’t understand. Could you tell me the answer?”

“

though they are distinctly feelings of displeasure."

"So even you have friends, Echidna. That's so nice," murmured Emilia, full of envy, causing Echidna to click her tongue in irritation. It didn't seem like she took that as a compliment.

"—The regrets that might surface in the Trial are myriad, so numerous that attempting to classify them would be absurd."

"Huh? Oh right, got it."

"There are moments in life that become seeds of regret and take root in a person's heart. At the same time, they can be the bedrock of a relationship. The way to confront lingering regrets will change depending on such circumstances. There are some pasts that cannot be overcome without making connections and talking things over with another."

"…I see… So that's how it is."

Emilia took Echidna's explanation to heart.

It made sense that regrets couldn't be easily summed up in a nice, simple package. For instance, if someone's regret stemmed from a past argument, remaining on bad terms with whomever they argued with could become a source of agony.

Even if people went through the same phenomenon, how they overcame their pasts varied depending on the individual.

"Mm, thank you…for the explanation…and for answering my question even though you hate me."

"The last thing I want is for you to mistake me for some kind of *really good person*, as you would put it. Nothing I have ever known before could come close to such humiliation. Answering your question is simply in my nature."

"Yeah, yeah."

Echidna was being thorny and standoffish, but the fact that she replied at all meant Emilia didn't find it particularly hard to get along with her. Even if she hated Emilia, Emilia didn't hate Echidna. After all, Emilia hardly knew the Witch well enough to have such strong feelings one way or another.

This incompatible pair advanced deeper and deeper into the forest that resided in Emilia's memories of her homeland.

Emilia was certain that whatever lay ahead was linked to the regrets she continued to harbor.

"Do you remember that your previous Trial ended in a pathetic, agonizing defeat?"

"I remember I was so useless that I can't even deny what you

said."

Refusing to walk side by side with Emilia, Echidna disparaged her from behind.

This was the second time Emilia was challenging the Trial, but her previous attempt had failed so spectacularly that she had just wanted to hide her face in shame. The worst part was she couldn't even remember what exactly had gone wrong.

—Emilia couldn't actually remember what she had seen in the previous Trial.

"I probably sealed away the memories I don't want to see. That must be why I can't remember them on my own. Even now…I'm still not ready to see them."

"So if you fail again, then it's just inevitable? What a cowardly thing to say."

"No, that's not what I meant. This…is where I start getting myself ready."

Shaking her head in response to Echidna's condemnation, Emilia firmly refuted the claim that she was looking for an excuse.

Those words made the Witch knit her brow. Right around the same time, the underbrush fell away as they slipped out of the woods they had been walking through for so long. Coming within view was a massive tree, larger than anything else in the Great Elior Forest—

"—It's more than just an oversize tree, right? There's a door at the roots. Is something inside the hollow of the trunk?"

Setting her gaze upon that giant tree, Echidna astutely noticed there was something peculiar at the center of the tree's roots, which rose out of the ground. The hollow at the center of the giant tree was about as large as a decent-size room. The door at the entrance was firmly closed. It had a bolt on it, which could be used to keep it firmly shut from the outside.

"It seems as though someone really wants to keep whatever's inside locked away."

"…Echidna…do you know something?"

"Such a vague question is nothing but a bother. What could you possibly be referring to?"

Emilia stared at her with upturned eyes, but Echidna simply shrugged, her face professing ignorance. Did she really have no idea, or did she know what was going on here after all? *Probably the latter*, thought Emilia.

“This is the Princess Room—it’s where they always made me play when I was very young.”

The moment she described the place aloud, vivid memories resurfaced. This was a special place where Emilia, who was treated like a princess in this forest, could play by herself in safety.

She had been brought here many, many times and spent so, so much time here alone.

“Oh, that’s right; I can’t touch the door. Can I just pass right through it?”

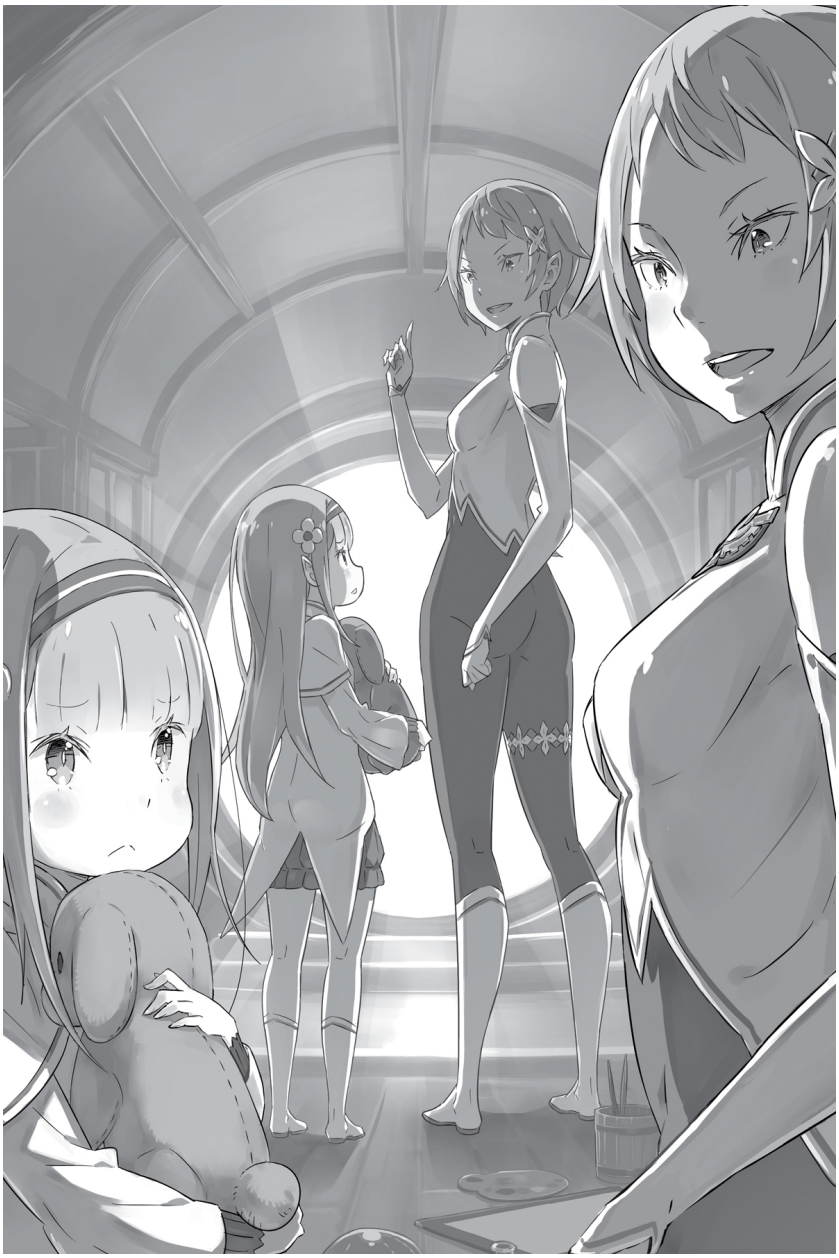
“Yes, because of how the world perceives you. Of course, a person lacking flexibility in her thinking might…”

“Wow, it’s true. I passed right through… Coming, Echidna?”

“

a human being's.

Just like Emilia, the woman had silver-colored hair and violet eyes. However, she'd cut her glistening silver hair short for convenience, and her beautiful, gemstone eyes were almond-shaped and sharp.



Even though the woman always described herself as grotesque, Emilia really liked the way she looked.

She was gallant and awe-inspiring. Emilia's memories of her were so striking that it almost hurt. After all, this person was—

"—My mother, Fortuna."

This was the woman who had lived with Emilia in the Great Elior Forest as her surrogate mother.

At the very least, to Emilia, she was family as much as any real mother could be.

"

Emilia felt at the time was difficult to forget.

But it wasn't because she felt hurt or abandoned. In fact, it was the exact opposite—she was ecstatic.

Whatever the facts, Fortuna was Emilia's mother as far as she was concerned. And yet, she supposedly had another mother. Most people lived with one father and just one mother. Emilia had two—it surprised her that something so happy could happen.

"You get your silver hair from my brother, huh. It seems this eye color of ours runs in the family as well… But that gentle face comes from your mother. Everyone on my side of the family has a foul look in their eyes."

"…But I really like your eyes."

Fortuna's eyes were as sharp as a beast's fang. From time to time, Emilia pushed her over the edge by breaking one rule or another, and those eyes would become even fiercer. Whenever that happened, Emilia trembled with fear.

Those stormy moments aside, Emilia thought Fortuna was an ideal mother. She found even that piercing gaze lovely and heartwarming.

As a mother, Fortuna was strict but gentle. Even her strictness had a soft touch to it.

"I have plenty I *really* regret. I should have been kinder to a lot of people. If only I'd thought that way sooner, I probably wouldn't have relied on my brother to the very end."

When she emphasized the word *really* by force of habit, a very lonely expression crossed Fortuna's face.

It was because this impression stayed with Emilia so very strongly that she deliberately mimicked her mother's mannerisms years later. She chose to use them not when she was sad but when she was happy and when she was smiling.

Not wanting her mother, who she loved so much, to bear burdens like sadness and loneliness, Emilia carried a childish hope that associating Fortuna's favorite phrase with good memories would help paint over all the bad ones.

"*Grrr*… Boooring."

Returning to the earlier scene, young Emilia had been left behind all alone in the Princess Room.

The adults adored Emilia as if she were an exquisite butterfly or a flower. They spared little expense in their attempts to keep her

entertained, filling the Princess Room with picture books, dolls, and a variety of drawing materials. Even so, boredom was boredom—Emilia was not fond of spending time in this room.

"And Mom is the one always telling me it's wrong to lie and hide things, isn't she?"

Adults weren't fair. They would teach children one rule, and then using this or that excuse, they would turn around and immediately break it themselves.

She wanted to go and see what game they were playing and join in if she could. But what would put a stop to the wish in Emilia's thoughts was that her mother always came back for her when she waited like a good girl. Still…

"I want to go outside…"

Her muted words were not meant for any other person; she was merely muttering her wish aloud. But the desire Emilia had murmured reached not the adults but something else instead.

"—?"

In the corner of the room, a pale glow abruptly floated upward. It was a flickering, fleeting, faint light, and Emilia gaped at its sudden appearance. As the phosphorescent glow stole Emilia's gaze, it cut across the room, sinking into the wall as it vanished.

"No fair! Wait! Wait!"

Youthful jealousy won over surprise. Pattering toward the corner of the room, Emilia gingerly touched the wall that had absorbed the light. She felt a little uneasy, but her inquisitiveness handily won out.

"Ah!"

Emilia discovered a little hole in the wall that her arm could easily slip into. There was no mistaking that this was how the light had slipped outside. It seemed like if she tried hard enough, she could widen that hole, which was a gap created by the tree roots entwined together at that spot.

"Ngh—"

With her arm still thrust into the hole, Emilia suddenly entertained a rather large worry.

The entrance to the Princess Room had been bolted shut and would absolutely not open until Fortuna returned. In other words, to Emilia, this hole could become her escape route to freedom. However, her mother had told her to wait in the room no matter what. Her heart ferociously swung between her personal curiosity

and her mother's admonition.

"…Well, Mom and the other grown-ups are doing something secret, too, so that makes us even."

In the end, with this one final excuse, Emilia inserted her body into the gap between the tree roots.

She was small, but the gap was even smaller. Forcing herself into the tiny space, she got her face and clothes dirty with mud as she somehow managed to crawl her way outside the hollow of the tree.

"—Ah."

As Emilia felt the wind on her cheek, her eyes glimmered with an odd sense of achievement.

Even though she'd just broken a rule, she wanted to go straight to Fortuna that very moment and brag, saying, *Eh-heh-heh, I did it!* Of course, if she did that, the scolding she'd get would be akin to a firestorm, so Emilia stopped herself just short of rushing out. It was a close call.

With a light step, Emilia broke into a happy run, leaving the Princess Room in the dust. To Emilia, this forest was her backyard. Somehow, she simply knew where Fortuna and the other adults were located.

In no time at all, Emilia found the adults, who had gathered in a forest glade. Mixed in with the adults was Archi, the next youngest after Emilia. The elven boy, who was much like an older brother to Emilia, was just as guilty as the adults for leaving Emilia out despite being a kid himself. It was practically unforgiveable.

But what caught her attention even more than the traitorous Archi was the group of individuals in the clearing wearing black clothing—they were guests unfamiliar to Emilia.

"I'll be sneaky…"

Aware she was doing something bad, Emilia opted to hide and peek from behind cover.

To avoid being seen by anyone in the clearing, Emilia selected a large tree, nimbly leaping up and climbing its branches. Tree-climbing was her specialty, something that constantly worried Archi and the others.

"—You always, always do so much to take care of us like this."

Emilia heard a voice at virtually the same moment she lay upon a large tree branch.

From her vantage point, she could see all the elves from the

settlement had gathered in the glade. Excluding Emilia, the population was around fifty people total. In contrast, the people in black numbered fewer, at around twenty.

The representatives from each respective side were discussing something right in the center of the glade. The elven representative, Fortuna, seemed like she was trying to hide something. Having spoken up first, she continued keeping a firm grip on the conversation thereafter.

“These are things that are difficult to obtain in the forest, so everyone is grateful.”

“We happily accept your kind words. Indeed, it pains me to say that this is the only way in which we can provide any support. Lady Fortuna, we always place such a burden upon you.”

“That goes for both of us, Geuse.”

With but the tiniest flutter of her long ears, Emilia strained to pick up the pieces of the conversation flitting between Fortuna and the other speaker. Even though she could hear them, she did not really understand the meaning of their words, but somehow, she detected affection in her mother’s pained smile.

Her mother’s affection was for the tall man in the black robe, whom she called Geuse.

The robe was a loose fit, but Emilia could instantly tell that his physique was supple and honed. Elves were often slender, so this was very new to her. Under his coiffed green hair was a watchful face, but his downcast eyes professed the deep humility he held while addressing Fortuna.

The sight made Emilia proud. Her mother was incredible enough to make such a large man curry her favor.

“Also, as I must confirm each time…is the seal intact?”

Emilia had puffed her chest in a strange sense of pride, but the man’s next words blew that all away. She could sense the weighty, complex emotions brimming in the man’s voice.

“I’d like to joke that you worry too much, but I don’t really feel like laughing. It’s all right, though; the seal is holding firm with no change whatsoever. No matter what happens, I can’t let it be lifted for even a moment—I would never be able to look my brother or sister in the eye otherwise.”

“About your older brother and his spouse…”

“It’s fine. I understand. It’s just…I will absolutely never forget the weight of the responsibility entrusted to me. I don’t intend to

ever abandon it, nor fulfill it half-heartedly. The same goes for you, right?"

"I… This is the only thing I have. My sense of duty and responsibility surely differs from yours, Lady Fortuna. Compulsion, lingering regrets… I cling to them almost obsessively. That is all."

When Geuse flashed an empty smile, Fortuna lowered her eyes, her expression pained. Behind the pair, the other adults were working to unload some baggage from the wagons that the black robes had apparently brought with them. From a distance, the cargo appeared to be clothing, foodstuffs, books, and so forth. Everything that was hard to find in a forest.

"Thanks to the blessings of the spirits, the changing of the seasons has little effect upon this forest, but even so, getting clothes and books is a *really* big help. We're grateful as always."

"By rights, your people deserve far better than this. It is not proper that you have been forced to live in such an inconvenient place like this."

"Come on—don't talk like that. We love the forest, you know."

Fortuna softly smiled as she spoke those words with a joking tone. Her kind expression carved a thin smile onto Geuse's lips. For a while, a gentle atmosphere seemed to surround the pair—

"—Lady Fortuna, the unloading is complete. I would like to thank all the disciples."

"Yes, thank you, Archi."

The one who offered the report was a youth who had his golden hair tied back in a triple braid. Bowing once to Fortuna, this young elf, who was clad in a white garment, turned to face Geuse.

"Lord Archbishop, on behalf of everyone in the forest, you have our thanks for always supporting us."

"This is the least I could do. I see that you have become a bit more reliable, Master Archi."

"The next Guardian cannot let himself be treated as a child forever."

Their exchange contained respect but also envy. The pair didn't seem very friendly, considering how distantly they addressed each other.

"Do remain in good health, for the sake of the forest, the seal, yourself, and your family as well."

Using these words as Archi's send-off, Geuse reluctantly gave the glade one final glance and bowed. Those dressed in black

followed suit. Then Archi, Fortuna, and all the other adults touched a hand to their chests and closed their eyes, an elven gesture that conveyed their respect.

At the end of that exchange, the black-clothed visitors began to lead the wagons out of the glade—

"Right, one last thing—is Lady Emilia in good health?"

"—!"

Geuse, on the verge of leaving, paused to ask a question that practically brought Emilia's heart to a stop.

She'd never imagined her name would suddenly appear at a time like this. She hurriedly covered her mouth, holding back a yelp.

"Don't worry. Emilia is a lively kid, and she's growing up to be a *really* good girl. Such a good girl is almost wasted on us… But I'm sorry. I cannot allow her to meet you yet."

"It is fine. I wish for nothing more. If Lady Emilia is being raised well, that is enough. A sinner such as I cannot hope for anything greater than this."

This was not merely a show of humility. It was obvious the man's voice carried a deep sense of shame and self-reproach toward himself.

As Geuse lowered his eyes, Fortuna did not offer any cheap words of consolation. He nodded, as if her silence was a form of salvation.

"—Lord Archbishop Romanée-Conti, are you ready?"

Addressed by a single man at the very end of the train of departing wagons, Geuse warmly spread his arms wide.

"Yes, this is sufficient. Now, let us grave sinners depart. Lady Fortuna, I shall see you again soon."

"…Even if no one else says it, we are grateful to all of you. I *really* mean it."

"Surely, it is for those words alone that I have given myself over to a century of anguish."

Leaving after one last pleasant smile, Geuse set off from the glade. Watching them go until they were no longer in sight, Fortuna closed her eyes but once, exhaling deeply.

"Lady Fortuna, are you tired? If this is hard on you, we can handle the rest from…"

"…How cheeky of you. Don't go treating me like an old woman just yet. I may be older than someone like you, who's young

through and through, but I'm still very much in my prime."

"I—I wouldn't dare! It's simply that the role of Guardian must be very arduous…"

Archi flew into a panic, his face going pale at the thought that his attempt to be considerate might have been misunderstood. However, once Fortuna burst into laughter, even the young boy realized she was just making fun of him.

"No matter how capable you are, you're so gullible that I'm worried you might not cut it as Guardian. You have to be *really* dependable if I'm going to entrust my precious treasure to you."

"P-please do not joke about that, Lady Fortuna…"

"Yes, yes, sorry. But can I take you up on your offer and leave this to you? I'm rather certain I have a very bored princess who I need to let out soon."

"—?!"

The various questions Emilia had been mulling over up to that point were all blown away by Fortuna's words. Emilia almost tumbled down as she leaped from the tree, hurrying back to the Princess Room.

Somehow, she used the same gap she'd escaped from to roll her way into the room. *All good*, she thought as she rose, but she immediately despaired when she realized her entire outfit was all muddy, like that of a child who'd been playing outside.

"What should I do, what should I do, what should I do…?!"

Initially, she thought she might be forgiven if she apologized. However, now that she'd eavesdropped on the conversation in the glade, she no longer thought it was possible. She was almost certain Fortuna hadn't wanted her to hear that conversation.

If Fortuna came to hate her, Emilia would be ruined. It would be the end of the world. If she didn't at least hide the scrapes on her body, Fortuna would realize right away. She was afraid of even sinking into the bath with all these scratches.

"Eh…?"

If I don't do something soon…

Her mind was racing, but then Emilia saw something that interrupted her frantic thoughts; the pale, phosphorescent glow had come once more.

This was the same light that had masterminded Emilia's escape plan. Emilia was perplexed when it flickered and swayed as it moved closer. Then the light's luminosity gradually grew stronger—

"—Amazing."

When Emilia touched the pale light, she felt warm as the scrapes on her body were healed. In several seconds, the marks were gone without a trace. Now, if she could only do something about the muddy clothes, she'd be all right.

Turning over a pot filled with ink for drawing, she thoroughly marred the clothes she wore, staining them black. Her clothes were so dirty that even a wash wouldn't clean them completely; if she smeared her clothes so that the mud was no longer obvious, then—

"—Emilia, are you awake?"

"*Myauh!* I-I'm awake! I'm awake, Mom! B-but…"

"Hmm? Why are you in such a hurry…? Huh?"

The bolt opened audibly outside, after which Fortuna poked her head in through the open door. Fortuna had a gentle smile on her face, but she grimaced the moment she entered the room.

"It really smells of ink in here… What happened?"

"Errr…I-I'm sorry! I spilled the pot for drawing all over the place…"

"This is a mess, all right…"

Fortuna put a hand to her forehead at the inky scent filling the room and the spilled pot, which had rolled onto its side. However, though first seemingly at a loss, she eventually smiled at Emilia.

"Well, there's no use crying about it now. We need to get you out of that outfit and wash the ink off you. As for a change of clothes…ahhh, here we are. If I didn't find any, I'd have to take a naked Emilia back home with me."

"Um, Mom, I…"

"Oh, you're such a worrywart, Emilia. You don't have to be so scared. It's not like you did it on purpose, so of course I'm not angry with you. More importantly, you're not hurt, are you?"

Walking over, Fortuna stripped away all the dirty clothes off Emilia. Then, after confirming her daughter had no noticeable injuries, the mother embraced her beloved daughter.

"Mom?"

"Mm, it's nothing. It's just, I *really*…wanted to see you, Emilia."

Fortuna continued to embrace Emilia like that as she brought her cheek close.

Normally, Fortuna never said such things that would make herself blush, which Emilia found so rare; she thought her mother seemed very forlorn. Hence—

"…How cheeky."

Fortuna opened her eyes a crack and murmured as Emilia, who was in her embrace, stroked her short silver hair.

However, she did not tell her to stop. The mother quietly accepted the feeling of her daughter's palm stroking her.

Gently, gently, Emilia continued stroking the head of her beloved mother.

"Hey, Emilia."

"…Mm?"

"—I love you."

There were many things she wanted to ask, many things she wanted to know.

—But at that moment, the young Emilia thought hearing that one phrase from her mother was plenty.

4

"I imagine your memories and the emotional scenes that had been locked away at the bottom of your heart are starting to overlap with each other little by little, yes?"

It was Echidna who spoke in this manner as she gazed at the mother-and-daughter pair embracing each other in the center of the Princess Room. There was no malice in this simple question. Emilia thought it was rather unexpected.

"I'm so surprised. I thought for sure you'd say much pricklier things about my younger self and my mother."

"…Even if one thinks such things, 'tis not recommended to actually convey them to others. As it is, my already low opinion of you is about to plunge even further."

"Ah, that's all right. Don't worry. I wouldn't say anything like this to anyone but you, Echidna."

"…For better or worse, you seem to be gradually getting influenced ever more strongly by *him*."

"Really? Thank you."

Echidna was twisting her lips in disgust. But understanding the *him* she indicated meant Subaru Natsuki, Emilia puffed her chest out just a tiny bit.

"—Then again, your impudence seems more an issue of your nature than anything you might have picked up from that boy. I have become quite sure of this after watching the actions your

younger self was so proud of."

"That's… I kind of can't excuse the way I behaved, either, but…"

Echidna's assertion made Emilia reflect on her younger self with the benefit of hindsight. She'd broken a rule, slipped out of the room, eavesdropped on a conversation between adults, and had even contrived a trick to cover up the deed.

"The vulgarity of your character has such incredibly deep roots. Even with a fine mother showering you with love, you were incorrigible."

"…Thank you for half of that."

She was glad to hear Fortuna being praised as a good mother. Yes, Mom was splendid. Emilia revered her, simultaneously recalling those feelings of love while despairing over her own obvious shortcomings.

And those weren't the only things she remembered.

"Geuse and Fairy…"

Lowering her eyes, Emilia murmured the two names that had played such key roles in her past. One was the green-haired man in the glade, Geuse. The other one was—

"The lesser spirit of healing that taught you about the gap in the wall… How ironic that you called it a fairy."

Echidna's teasing statement also seemed to express pity that she called the lesser spirit a fairy. That was a term for an evil spirit. No spirit would be pleased to be referred to as a detestable, abominable fairy. Even so, Emilia had a reason why she referred to the lesser spirit that way.

"There was a story about that in a book I read in this room. The book said fairies weren't bad but were actually good. I can't remember the details, though."

She was sure she remembered a book conveying a fairy tale from another land. At present, she could remember neither the title nor the contents of the tome, but it had left a strong impression of fairies as being gentle, reliable creatures.

"So you have remembered your mother, an acquaintance, and this fairy. Is this the past you wished to see?"

"No, not yet. There's still… I haven't remembered enough yet."

Shaking her head, Emilia replied to Echidna's question as she left the cavity under the giant tree. She was walking not to a scene that lived in her memories but deeper into the forest, to a path

barred by countless trees.

There rested something that she had to remember. Ahead lay—

"What's there?"

"—The seal."

5

—The first time the young Emilia became aware of the *seal* was after one of her now-numerous and dramatic escapes.

"There we go! Yay! It worked this time, too!"

Hmm-hmm, Emilia went, puffing out her chest, her hair full of leaves as she spoke with satisfaction.

The place was the Princess Room—or rather, outside it, right where she exited her lifeline to freedom. This was yet another day when she'd been left behind in the room, but she'd deftly escaped while Fortuna's attention was occupied. The impact from falling from the hole was softened by the leaves that had accumulated underneath, and Emilia had completed yet another customary and felonious escape.

"Lately, Archi's *really* been a worrywart, so I've got to be careful."

Warily surveying her surroundings, Emilia exercised prudence in confirming that Archi, her watcher, was not around.

The traitor, Archi, who was in league with the adults, occupied a position much like Emilia's overseer. It was fun playing with him, but these were two different stories. *I absolutely can't let my guard down*, she thought, clenching her fists tightly.

"Okay, come out, Fairy."

Confirming the enemy's absence, Emilia called out to the phosphorescent glow floating overhead. Ever since their initial encounter, Emilia and the glow had become the best of friends; at that point, Emilia fondly referred to it as *Fairy*.

With the fairy's cooperation, Emilia felt like the ruler of the forest. She could peek at conversations between adults, eat people's snacks without permission, and shuffle the ornaments in other people's houses, making her a grand criminal indeed.

"I wonder if Geuse and the others are coming today, too…"

Emilia hammered out her plan of action from that point forward as she plucked leaves off her head.

Thanks to her repeated crimes, Emilia had ascertained she was

always left behind in the Princess Room when Geuse and the others visited the forest. Each time, Geuse and his people came with a train of wagons carrying foodstuffs and clothing. Everyone assembled at the glade to receive those things.

"I thought Mom and the others were hiding something a lot more fun and exciting."

Now that she knew their secret, it held much less appeal for Emilia, leaving her bored. Even so, she frequently went to eavesdrop because from time to time, Emilia's name, as well as terms that seemed related to her parents, cropped up during the conversations between Fortuna and Geuse.

Fortuna didn't talk much about Emilia's real parents. She hesitated to bring them up. That was why her conversations with Geuse were a golden opportunity for Emilia to discover more about them.

"Not that they talk about it much, but… Up! We! Go!"

Her scheme kept missing the mark, but she remained undaunted, climbing the tree and taking her usual position once more.

Below her was the now familiar scene of the adults in the glade. Fortuna and Geuse were there, too. At a distance, the pair seemed engaged in pleasant chat, but she felt Fortuna's expression looked particularly relaxed.

"Lately, Emilia has been *really* energetic. She always comes back with mud on her clothes. I wash them and wash them day after day, but I just can't seem to catch up."

"If she is in good health, all is well and good. I have brought as many changes of clothes as I could. Beyond the forest, the winter season is finally ending, so many of these garments may prove unnecessary."

"I'm sorry; even though we rely on you for so much already, I always seem to ask for more… Are there clothes for adults, too?"

"Yes, of course. Surely, there are some that suit you nicely as well, Lady Fortuna."

Right in the middle of their discussion about Emilia, Geuse replied to her question with a soft expression that made Fortuna go rigid, as if he had slipped through a gap in her armor. After that, she seemed rather blushy as she glared at Geuse with upturned eyes.

"…Goodness. We've known each other this long, but I never

realized you were the sort to make those kinds of jokes."

"—? I merely intended to speak my mind. Did I say something odd?"

"…I know you are a man without guile. That makes it even worse, you know."

As Geuse cocked his head in confusion, Fortuna averted her eyes with an exasperated air. The gesture brought a look of consternation to Geuse's face, whereupon he gently reached his hand out toward Fortuna's forehead. His palm touched her brow.

"…Geuse, what are you doing?"

"No, ah, come to mention it, once quite some time ago, Lady Fortuna, you were speaking sourly to me when you had a fever… It seems you do not at the moment."

"How many decades ago was that? Goodness, you really do treat me like such a child."

Fortuna pouted at his misplaced concern. However, the corners of her lips were smiling, making it obvious that she did not find their exchange unpleasant.

No, far from it—Fortuna was clearly enjoying her time with Geuse.

"…Muu."

Somehow, Emilia did not find the sight of her mother like that very amusing at all.

The impression she had of Fortuna was that she was sharp-eyed, gallant, and strict to others. Her gentle, caring face was supposed to be her beloved daughter Emilia's exclusive privilege.

"Hmph, stupid Geuse. And Archi's stupid, too."

She took out her anger on the acquaintance who had never met her and on the boy helping unpack the cargo.

Then Emilia decided in her heart that if this day, too, proved fruitless, she would let Geuse have a taste of her wrath. *I'll clog up the wagon wheels with cloth and spill oil all over them*, thought Emilia, tracing out the ingenious, devilish revenge plot in her mind. But her machinations ended before they even began.

"—So is the seal still in place?"

Lowering the volume of his voice, Geuse raised what Emilia now recognized as a customary question. She'd become so used to this exchange that Fortuna's reply came as no surprise.

"Same as always. You really do make sure to check each and every time, don't you?"

“Such is my duty… Besides, though I do not wish to impart unnecessary concern, this time, there is some kind of suspicious air outside the forest. Perhaps it is needless anxiety on my part, but do keep this in mind.”

“…Understood. I, the Guardian, will keep watch over everything here, seal and Key included. Please take care of the outside.”

“I leave it in your hands—for Lady Emilia’s sake and for those two as well.”

As Geuse bent his hips, Fortuna nodded back with a serious look on her face.

“…Seal.”

As the pair’s conversation made her ears tremble, Emilia murmured a single word to herself.

The word *seal* came out without fail at the end of Fortuna and Geuse’s conversations. Up until then, she had little interest in the word. But this day was different.

The seal and Emilia had been mentioned in the same breath. Besides, she was also curious about the words Geuse had spoken at the end.

—Maybe, just maybe, *those two* referred to Emilia’s father and mother?

“Seal…”

Uttering the word once more, Emilia returned to the Princess Room. Tumbling into the cavity, Emilia moved with great haste, busily creating evidence that she’d been spending time in that room.

In a short while, she made a drawing, changed the clothes on the dolls, and helped herself to a variety of snacks.

With that job finished, she was just wiping the sweat off her brow when she heard Fortuna’s voice calling to her from outside.

“Emilia, sorry for the wait. Have you been a good girl today, too?”

“Ugh… I-I’ve been a good girl? I was good. Mm, yes, I was a good girl.”

“

It seemed like Emilia's acting ability had all but fooled Fortuna's eyes. A sense of guilt weighed upon Emilia, but she powered through, telling herself she could not falter there.

What she'd overheard in the glade today absolutely needed to stay secret. In particular, the *seal* was very important. Emilia was sure she remembered that a *seal* meant a hidden place of some sort.

And maybe, just maybe, could her own parents be hidden away in that *seal*?

And if it was somewhere in the Great Elior Forest, then—

"—Please, 'kay?"

Closing one eye, Emilia coaxed the phosphorescent glow she had befriended to search the forest for her.

Even at this point, the young girl's exceptional beauty had begun to sprout—by the time she'd grown up, she would be able to charm people with her smile alone. Her adorable coaxing had employed but a small fraction of this.

6

Something seemed to be guiding Emilia's feet as she and Echidna advanced deeper into the forest.

Strangely, she did not feel lost. For some reason, she simply knew where she needed to go, and she pressed on with a sense of certainty. She made full use of being disconnected from the world, walking straight through an awful path that was better described as a dense thicket.

The muddy ground, the large, tightly packed trees—after overcoming these obstacles, Emilia beheld a scene of white.

It was not snow—here, the trees, from leaf and branch to root, were pure white.

Both the sacred forest and the elven settlement were protected by numerous lesser spirits—yet, even within the Great Elior Forest, the anomalous air filling this place was conspicuous.

It was solemn, holy, a space exempt from the laws of the world. And at the center of this space was—

"—A door. A curious sight indeed."

Right in the center of this space, ringed by pure-white trees, stood a "door," which seemed to stand out from the rest of the forest.

The door was not strange in its outward appearance; it was how

the door stood.

The double door was standing all on its own, right in the middle of this space. Though it was a door, it was not attached to any building, its appearance unchanged even if one circled behind it.

"This is the seal."

As Echidna questioningly set her gaze upon the door, Emilia spoke to her.

The seal—this was the holy secret hidden in the depths of the Great Elior Forest. Fortuna and the residents of the settlement were protecting it, and Geuse never forgot to check that it was safe.

It was the same in Emilia's memories and in the world reproduced from her present memories. There was no mistake.

It was a door connected to nothing, a door with no way of opening it, a door called a seal—

"But if this is the seal, what…?"

"—It seems the answer has arrived."

Emilia placed her hand to her forehead as a wave of nausea hit her. More memories oozed out of her, like they were gnawing at old wounds. Echidna quietly let a soft sigh trickle out as she stood behind Emilia.

Emilia turned around. Ahead of her, a faint, phosphorescent glow leisurely floated by, and past it—

"This is the *seal*?"

She beheld the sight of her younger self, tilting her head with an innocent face as she gazed upon the door.

7

Young Emilia blinked her wide-open eyes repeatedly at the mysterious door standing right before her.

She'd finally ascertained the location of the *seal* that Fortuna and the others had been hiding. Even together with Fairy, it had been quite an ordeal to haphazardly search a large forest. But—

"Thanks to everyone, we cracked the case. Yay!"

Emilia grinned broadly at the phosphorescent lights twirling around her. There were more than before, but they weren't so numerous that she couldn't count them on her fingers. Through tenacious negotiations with the countless fairies scattered throughout the forest, she had gathered these fellows under her

banner, building up a rather large host.

"Why isn't it falling down with a *fwomp*?"

The *seal*, which had been successfully located with the fairies' cooperation, wouldn't budge no matter how much she pushed or pulled.

To the naked eye, the door appeared to be made of wood, but it felt cold, almost icelike to the touch. Rubbing the surface produced a pleasantly smooth sensation that was like stroking a polished gemstone; she thought that each and every thing about its existence was mysterious.

There was a lock right in the center of the closed door, looking old and bearing a keyhole around the size of Emilia's palm. She wondered whose pocket could contain such a large key. The keeper must be a large person indeed.

"I don't really get any of it…but we sure did find it. *Clap, clap, clap.*"

Hoping in her heart that her parents were hidden within the *seal*, she'd just gotten her first tangible lead. However, after satisfying her curiosity once, she was absolutely not content with stopping here.

She'd expose what everyone was hiding by working with the fairies. There was still much to be done.

"Hmph. It's Mom and everyone else's fault. Geuse's fault, too."

Thinking of the tall man dressed in the black habit and not currently present, Emilia stuck out her tongue. He was an enemy who'd seen a side of Emilia's precious mother that she didn't show to anyone else—without Emilia's permission, to boot. Girding herself for an inevitable showdown, Emilia devoted herself fully to crafting a plan to defeat Geuse.

"I'll surprise Geuse with Fairy and, while he's in a big panic, stomp on his foot. I'll stomp on *both* his feet, and with my heels, too! …That seems like it would hurt a lot, so I'll keep it to just his toes."

Even in her most heartless scheme, she didn't neglect to add some measure of kindness. Anyone who insisted on fighting a cold-blooded battle who cared little for blood or tears would eventually lose the trust of their allies. She needed to treasure her bonds with the fairies.

"Okay, let's head home. For today's masterpiece, I feel like doing a red sky and a snow-white forest!"

Having achieved her latest objective, Emilia raced down the path home in a patter together with the fairies.

It was a fairly treacherous path, but the nimble Emilia hopped right over any obstacles. Really, Fortuna had told her she was forbidden from entering that area. That was what kept her from discovering the *seal* for so long. *Mom is too shrewd.*

"But we got one up on her, didn't we…? What's wrong?"

In the middle of treading down a poor and unfamiliar path, Emilia abruptly halted her feet as the fairies signaled her. They were blinking in and out in an irregular pattern, darting across her field of vision before drifting into a thicket off to the side.

"Mm? Mmmm? This…this smells like an adventure!"

The fairies' state reminded Emilia of when she'd first met them in the Princess Room. That had laid the foundation for Emilia's strong relationship with them. This time probably held some kind of meaning, too.

"Yahoo!"

Chasing after the fairies, Emilia energetically leaped into the underbrush. Pushing her way through the tall grass, she resolutely advanced along an animal trail, her silver hair getting snagged by branches several times along the way. And then—

"This is quite worrisome… She has strayed from the promised hour."

"—Ah!"

Just when she was coming out of the thicket, she happened upon a black back standing in the forest. Letting out a voice of surprise, Emilia hurriedly covered her mouth and hid in the thicket. But it was too late.

"Oh my? To whom does this adorable rump belong to?"

A familiar voice addressed Emilia as she hid in the thicket with her butt in plain sight. The voice made Emilia twitch and tremble. He did not know her, but she knew him, the accursed villain.

"I—I request gentle treatment as your prisoner…"

Resigning herself that there was no fooling him, Emilia spoke words of surrender that she barely understood. As she raised a white flag, a smile came over the man—over Geuse.

"My, my, a rather adorable young lady has come to vi… Eh?"

The child's adorable resistance put a relaxed expression on him, but in the next instant, that expression froze over.

Cutting off his words in shock, his tranquil face stiffened and

went rigid. Seeing Geuse's eyes wide-open startled Emilia, too; the pair faced off as a wave of complex emotions sloshed between them.

"Y-young lady… No, you could not be…"

Geuse's voice trembled as he shook his head, seemingly in disbelief at what he was seeing. Looking up nervously, Emilia felt concern plucking at her tiny chest.

The man she saw was frail and forlorn, like a child who'd lost his way but been found by a parent, like a traveler always walking in darkness who had found the light, with an expression that was a mixture of fear and expectation.

—Someone had to speak to him. Someone had to hold his hand.

The instant she thought that, Emilia completely forgot all about the grudge she'd harbored for so long.

"—Geuse, are you all right?"

"—?! Ah, aah, ah, aaaah…!"

When she spoke to him, Geuse's expression, Geuse's emotions, broke down.

Feeling struck by Emilia's gaze as if it were a thunderbolt, Geuse fell to his knees on the spot, his back trembling.

A flood of tears coursed from Geuse's eyes as he gazed at Emilia with rapt attention. Geuse, the first large adult she had ever seen cry, drew his body back and shook his head toward Emilia.

—As if it was a prayer. As if it was a plea. As if simply giving thanks.

"*All right*… Yes, yes! I am indeed all right. There is no problem. After all, I… I, now, just now, have never known a greater sense of salvation than this…!"

"Really…? If that's true, then why are you crying?"

"I am not…weeping out of sadness… My tears are from joy, from jubilation, from happiness… They are tears of warmth because I cannot contain such happiness. This is for no other reason than… how y-you…how your people have saved me… That's why I—!"

Listening to Geuse's weeping voice, Emilia held his hand. It felt like the natural thing to do.

The touch of his fingers conveyed his emotions to her. Emilia firmly clenched his hand in return. She dearly wished her own feelings might reach him as well.

—As Geuse sobbed over and over, what he had described as tears of happiness flowed without end.

“Crying because you’re happy…”

As Geuse continued to weep, Emilia somehow understood.

Emilia herself sometimes spent nights feeling lonely and unable to sleep. Whenever that happened, she crept into Fortuna’s bed, resting easy in the warmth of her mother’s embrace.

Inside her mother’s arms, Emilia was freed of worry, and somehow, she often felt like crying. Geuse might have been experiencing similar feelings to what Emilia had at such times.

Emilia wondered if she could grant him happiness the way her mother had done for her.

“It’s all right, Geuse. It’s all right. It’s okay.”

Consoling him, Emilia stroked Geuse’s head with her free hand.

When Geuse went rigid at the first touch, Emilia embraced his head against her tiny chest. The tremors of his sobs shot straight to her heart; it felt like she could feel the warmth of his body reaching deep inside her.

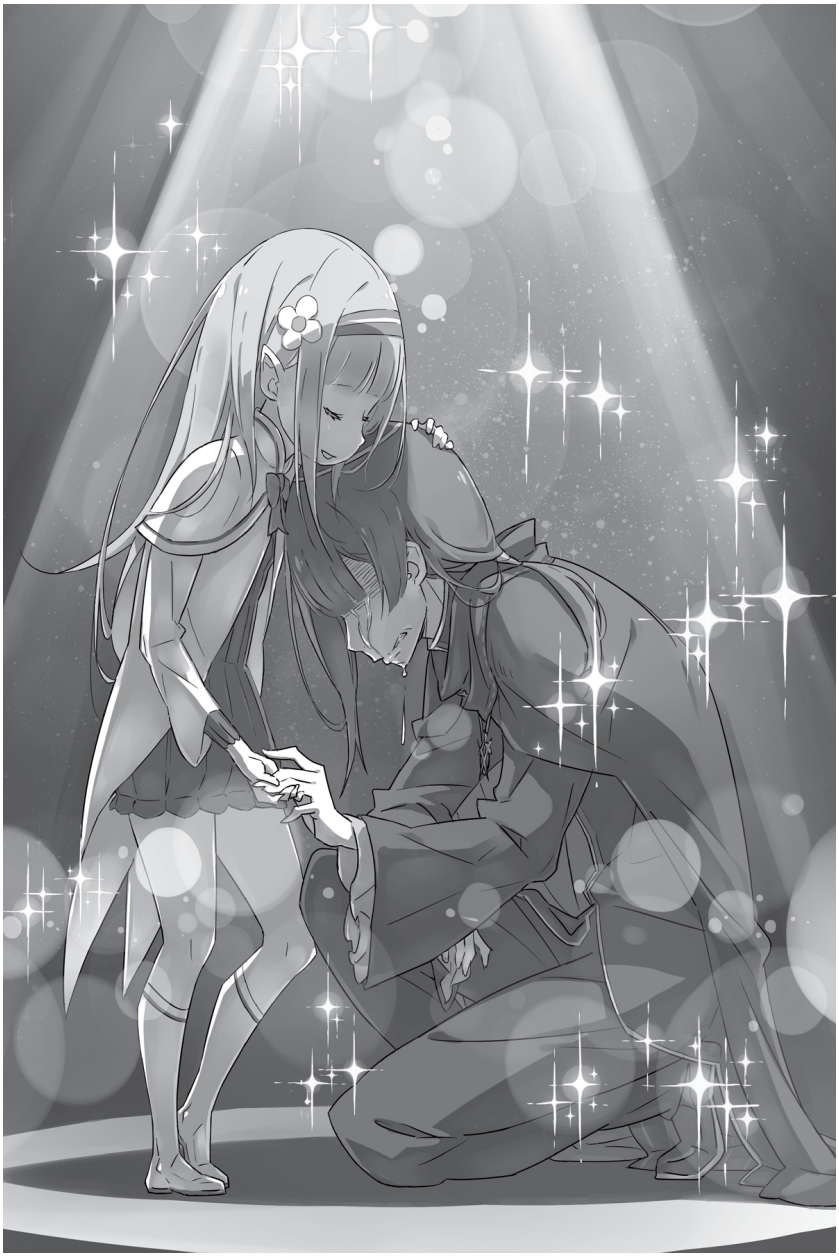
—Despite her grand plan to stomp on his feet, this was how they ended up together.

What a helpless person. What a weak foe. Of course she couldn’t do anything mean to someone who was crying. She had no choice but to help him feel better, so surely, Mom would forgive her, too.

“It must be lonely, crying by yourself.”

When Geuse was finished, they went to where her mother was, hand in hand.

Now she had to tell Mom. She had to tell her about meeting Geuse, about heading off to play deep in the forest, and that even though he was an adult, Geuse had cried his eyes out.



—She had to, now that the pair had shared their secrets and were no longer enemies but something akin to friends.

8

"—!"

For an instant, the torrent of resurrected memories made Emilia feel incredibly dizzy.

She blinked several times over and got her breathing back under control. The impact had left her heart thumping hard against her chest. By reliving memories as seen through her younger self's eyes, Emilia had regained her precious past.

"I can't believe I forgot so many things that'd happened…"

Emilia found no joy in those gaps getting filled. Rather, she felt remorse as she realized just how much she had taken for granted.

They were warm, precious memories—enough that she felt deep and sharp regret for having forgotten them in the first place.

The time she'd spent together with Mom; how Archi and everyone in the village had been so kind to her; Fairy, who had helped her with the seal and the Princess Room; and that she'd met Geuse, the man she was not supposed to meet, then befriended him —they were all precious and forgotten memories.

"But…I probably wouldn't have been able to accept it all until very recently."

The journey toward those lost memories was linked to the regret that ate away at Emilia's heart. If she'd come unprepared to face her past, she probably would have never recovered. It was because Puck understood this that he had used their pact as a reason to bottle up Emilia's memories.

In that state, even if she was to meet someone she should have remembered in some kind of tangible way, then surely, the sealed memories would have prevented her from understanding. Instead, there would only be pain and sorrow.

—All to protect Emilia's heart from her own memories.

But with that pact broken, the lid on her memories had been lifted, and the path to her sealed past had been cleared.

By revisiting her memories, Emilia was finally ready to challenge her past—the origin of the regrets she'd been unable to

face until now.

She had what she needed to confront these regrets that remained unconquered.

Last time, she'd been unable to do anything in the Trial except break down and cry. But now—

"—I'm scared, but I won't cower."

"Could you keep your decisions from sounding like they come from the disagreeable, weepy, *clinging to a man whom I substitute as a father figure* woman you are?"

When Emilia voiced her feelings toward the Trial, Echidna, standing behind her, simply poured on scorn. Emilia responded to the sarcasm infused into those words by boldly puffing out her chest.

"I'm sure Subaru will forgive me for that…but I don't want him to lose faith in me, nor do I want to lose faith in myself. I'm weak, but I don't want to dig in my heels and stay that way."

Besides—

"I don't want to turn all the words Subaru wrote for me into lies."

He'd carved numerous cheers and countless feelings into the stone walls of the tomb for her sake, as she was challenging the Trial. It was receiving these words, and being sent off by them, that had brought Emilia that far.

"I trust Subaru. That's why I want to be a girl who will not bring shame to those feelings."

"—Do as you please. All I'm doing here is gloating over your anguish."

No matter how much malice Echidna might pile on, Emilia's current mindset could not be swayed with words. Perhaps realizing as much from the exchanges between them on their shared journey through her memories, Echidna lowered her shoulders and withdrew her poison. Emilia understood what the Witch's demeanor meant.

"The preliminaries are over, aren't they?"

"Indeed, they are— The opening skirmishes are over. This time, the Trial that broke you will truly begin."

Echidna's words made Emilia nod—and instantly, the scenery around them changed.

After the meeting with Geuse, the pair left the sealed woods using a forest trail, making their way hand in hand to a surprised

Fortuna, whereupon she flew into a conflagration-like rage at both of them.

Then the three of them walked to the forest settlement side by side. Such was the scene.

It was as if this scene had waited for Emilia to fill the blanks in her memory—no, it was exactly that. Her memories, her homeland, and Fortuna and Geuse had surely been waiting for her…to watch gently over them all, the same way they had watched over young Emilia back then.

—They'd been there to welcome Emilia tenderly upon her return to the homeland in her memories.

"That's why—"

—Emilia had to accept in full the Trial that yet awaited.

"—Please wait, Lady Emilia. Running around like that is dangerous…!"

"It's not dangerous, not one little bit. You're the one who keeps falling and scraping his knees, Geuse."

"No matter how injured I may become, I care not. Lady Emilia's body comes first. If your jewellike skin was to be damaged, even if I died, it would not be death enough!"

"Geuse, somehow, that way of speaking sounds *really* indecent."

Emilia was jumping around the woodland trail recklessly, while making fun of Geuse like he was a very frail child stumbling around —sights that brought a pained smile over Fortuna as she pointed out how strange he sounded. Geuse hastily shook his head.

"N-no, no. I was not even thinking such insolence! I am purely concerned for Lady Emilia… Ahhh, Lady Emilia! You must not go that way!"

"Well, I wanna! Come and catch me if you can—!"

As Geuse frantically switched from trying to defend himself to being overprotective, Emilia leaped into a thicket in high spirits. Seeing Geuse at his wits' end made Fortuna burst into laughter.

"My, my, I knew it. That girl's mischief is a handful even for us."

"It is good that she is energetic. However, I would prefer if she avoids danger as much as possible… If she could live healthily inside the house, bathed in the light of the sun, she can leap around, then, without concern of breaking anything…"

"Geuse…that's a *really* strict way to live…"

“Mnhhh… Is—is that so? But if it is for Lady Emilia’s sake, I—I…!”

Trapped between parental love and concern, Geuse gravely clutched his head. Seeing his reaction deepened Fortuna’s troubled smile, but it was parental love and envy that rested in her narrowed eyes.

It was as if that very instant, the scene made her feel a sense of happiness that should not be possible.

“Sheesh!! Mom, Geuse! Why won’t you chase after me?!”

It was then that Emilia returned, tumbling out of the thicket as she reached the limits of her patience. Emilia’s young cheeks were red and puffed up as she accused the two lazy adults one after the other.

“This isn’t the time, okay?! We were in the middle of a chase!”

“Ahhh, I am very sorry! I shall regret this blunder for the rest of my days…!”

“Geuse, you mustn’t spoil her like that… Emilia, come over here for a moment.”

“Whaaat, Mom…? Sheesh, Mom’s such a softie… *Grrr!*”

Despite Emilia’s angry face, she walked over when Fortuna beckoned her by hand. Then, just as she came close, Fortuna easily scooped her up.

“Awww, too bad. Emilia’s been caught by Mom.”

“Ah, no fair! You can’t do that, Mom! This doesn’t count! You cheated! You should think about what you did!”

“Oh my, if you’ve thought that far, maybe you should also take some time to think on what I told you, hmm? I wonder, why are Mom and Geuse chasing little Emilia?”

“Fwah!”

This poke at her sore spot made Emilia cover her mouth with her hands.

“Y-you’re wrong, Mom. Fairy wanted to go outside, and then…”

“Your mother hates girls who blame fairies for the things they do. Understand, Emilia?”

Fortuna spoke to her daughter in her arms with eyes both gentle and strict. Emilia, squirming under those words and that gaze, hung her head.

“I’m sorry, Mom. Since I became friends with Geuse, I wanted to tell you about it…and also that Geuse is a big crybaby so someone has to help him.”

“Those feelings are *really* important. That’s very good of you, Emilia. But in the first place, you became friends with Geuse because you went somewhere I made you promise not to go to, didn’t you?”

“Y-yes…I did…”

“And that was *really* naughty, Emilia.”

Fortuna lowered Emilia, whose eyes were still focusing on the ground, before cupping her daughter’s cheeks with both hands. She brought Emilia’s face up to meet her own; their violet eyes reflected in each other’s.

“You mustn’t break your promises. Keeping them is very important. A promise is an expression of trust, so you mustn’t break them and betray the feelings of trust someone placed in you.”

To Emilia, who was nearly in tears, Fortuna spoke gravely yet gently.

“Emilia, I want you to promise Mom right now. Promise you’ll always keep your promises.”

“Yeah… Yes, I will keep them. I’m sorry, Mom.”

“Good. Then everything’s fine.”

After hearing Emilia’s teary-eyed vow, Fortuna embraced her beloved daughter in both arms. Squeezing her daughter close and tight, she stroked Emilia’s hair as teary sobs escaped from the girl.

“So, Geuse, are you all right?”

“I—I am…so overwhelmed by this d-dazzling sight, I cannot restrain my t-tears…!”

As Fortuna regarded him with an exasperated face, Geuse squatted in the shadow of a tree, using his sleeve to hide his own weeping. He seemed to have been deeply moved at seeing the exchange between mother and daughter up close. She really couldn’t refute Emilia’s appraisal of him as a crybaby. Setting this aside for the moment, Fortuna turned her head back toward Emilia.

“Besides all that, Emilia. You spoke of a fairy…”

“Ah, yeah. The fairies have been helping me since a while back… Come on out.”

Not realizing that Fortuna was concerned about her having invisible friends, Emilia gently called out to them. That very moment, countless lights flooded in all around Emilia, causing Fortuna and Geuse to gaze in wonder.

“It can’t be… Lesser spirits…? And in such numbers…”

“I am most surprised that she is served by so many lesser spirits

at such a young age. It would seem Lady Emilia is a naturally talented spirit mage."

"Spi…rit? Spirit…mage?"

The pair's reaction and the unfamiliar terms made Emilia blink hard and tilt her head in apparent confusion. Geuse nodded deeply at Emilia.

"Lady Emilia, the beings you call fairies are actually lesser spirits. They exist everywhere throughout the world. A spirit mage is one who can convey their heart to them, borrowing the spirits' power through forming a pact."

"And I can become one?"

"If you grow up healthy and remain beloved by the spirits like this, Lady Emilia, then surely…"

Geuse's words made Emilia's face visibly brighten. *If a spirit mage means someone who gets along nicely with the fairies, then I wanna be one*, thought Emilia with a spring in her chest.

"Hold on, Geuse. You mustn't put strange notions into her head. Just because she can commune with lesser spirits doesn't mean she can be a spirit mage… It isn't something this girl needs."

"Lady Fortuna, Lady Emilia shall not remain young forever, either. The time will come when she cannot stay confined to the hollow of a great tree. There will surely be times when she cannot be kept from standing alongside Lady Fortuna and everyone else. When that time comes, the spirits shall lend Lady Emilia their strength."

"But I don't want to subject my sweet Emilia to something that could be so dangerous…"

The issue of Emilia's education had shifted into an argument between the pair. Upon seeing this, Emilia swiftly circled behind Geuse and stuck her tongue out at Fortuna.

"I'm on Geuse's side today! I'm definitely gonna become whatever a spirit mage is!"

"Now look—you've gotten her all worked up about this. Geuse, how are you going to take responsibility?"

"Ah. What should…? Um…well, this has gotten rather serious…"

Emilia was headstrong; meanwhile, Fortuna was wiping her hands of the whole thing. Caught between the pair, Geuse seemed overwhelmed, a sight that made Emilia go "hmm?" as she narrowed her eyes.

“Somehow, Mom and Geuse seem like a mom and dad…”

“Wha—?!”

When Emilia spoke those words with a guileless face, her statement made Fortuna’s face flush beet red. Nervously waving a hand, the woman then stroked Emilia’s head seemingly at random.

“N-now, just a minute, Emilia, don’t say strange things like that. Geuse and I have known each other a long time already, that’s all. We don’t have a relationship that could be described in those words, all right?”

“That’s correct, Lady Emilia. Lady Fortuna and I have both lived long…… To one as long-lived as I, even Lady Fortuna is like a little child to me.”

“Hmph…”

Geuse gently covered for the rapidly speaking Fortuna. However, Emilia could tell that for some reason, his words had put Fortuna in a sour mood. Geuse didn’t notice.

“No matter how you slice it, *little child* is excessive. Do you even know how old I am right now?”

“Er, ah, it was a figure of speech. Of course I have a firm and accurate grasp of your age, and Lady Fortuna has grown too tall and beautiful to be called a young child, but…”

“Hmmmm… Very well, then. I forgive you. But you should *really* reflect on it.”

“Haaa…”

As Geuse inclined his head, Fortuna folded her arms and pressed him to reflect on his actions. But Emilia realized that Fortuna had brightened again. Geuse really wasn’t keeping up.

And still wearing a face that showed no clear understanding, Geuse nodded Emilia’s way.

“The topic strayed somewhat, but Lady Fortuna and I have been acquaintances for quite a long time now. Indeed, ever since the time Lady Emilia’s father and mother were in good health…”

“—Geuse!”

“…I am so sorry.”

When Geuse tried to return to a gentler topic, the color of Fortuna’s face changed as she scolded him. The peaceful exchange from just before had vanished. Geuse’s expression became pained in reaction to his own slip of the tongue.

“Father and Mother…?”

“I’m sorry, Emilia. We’ll speak about that another time… More

importantly, it's time for you to return to your room. You haven't finished reflecting on your behavior, after all."

"*Another time*… Will you really, though?"

Emilia puffed up her cheeks, making plain her dissatisfaction at the conversation ending partway. However, Fortuna pressed a finger to one of Emilia's cheeks, making the air leak out with a *puu*.

"Be a good girl and wait patiently, 'kay? You'll have other chances to meet Geuse again. I'll…make sure of it…"

"Really, really? You promise? You will, right?"

"Oh, this girl. I wonder where she learned how to quibble like this?"

It was only just moments ago that she'd been told how important it was to keep your promises. When her beloved daughter brought it back up, Fortuna reluctantly flashed a troubled smile, embracing Emilia.

"Yes, it's a promise. It's a *really* important promise between Mom and Emilia."

"…Mm. All right. I'll go back to my room, then."

Promises were important. That's why Emilia nodded, trusting in Fortuna's promise.

When she was released, Emilia then raced over to Geuse. As Geuse watched her, Emilia extended a hand, smiling.

"See you later, Geuse. You mustn't cry so much, so……promise until we meet next?"

"—Yes. We shall most certainly meet again. I look forward to it."

Taking the tiny hand extended to him, Geuse made a small smile as the two exchanged a handshake. Their hands, exchanging the warmth of their palms, served as a greeting upon their parting.

Just as Emilia was about to proceed back to the Princess Room —

"—It seems he has come."

This was no voice from the past. It was a voice from the present, calling out to Emilia from behind.

It was the voice of the Witch, the only person experiencing time in the same way as Emilia was in that world of the past.

The murmur from Echidna, who had watched events in silence up to that point, drew Emilia's attention, too. Then she immediately realized what Echidna's words meant.

—There was a boy who seemed the epitome of the color white.

He had white hair that was neither long nor short and white-colored skin lacking even a hint of a tan. He was clad in attire that was pure white, with not a single other color upon it; he felt sickly, as if he avoided all external interference from color itself.

His face was modestly handsome, but it was average with no eye-catching features. His appearance overall seemed extremely lacking in any kind of individuality; he gave off the impression that he would immediately be forgotten as soon as he melted into any crowd. But that impression was itself firm proof that he was an anomalous being.

"…Who are you?!"

Both Fortuna and Geuse instantly noticed his strange presence. Fortuna immediately pulled Emilia close, extremely wary of the boy who had appeared without warning. Sensing this, the boy slipped out of the forest with a calm gait, stroking his own white hair.

"When you wish to ask someone's name, is it not polite to first state yours?"

The reply made Fortuna's emotions chill over all at once, amplifying her wariness even more. However, the boy lowered his shoulders, regarding with exasperation the wind of enmity blowing toward him.

"My reply just now was nothing short of clichéd, but that said, I think anyone can appreciate the temptation to react that way in this kind of situation. Even though we are meeting each other for the first time and we stand on completely equal ground, why must you arbitrarily look down upon me and demand my name like this? Do you even realize the fact that you have subconsciously, inconsiderately, carelessly, and one-sidedly classified me as inferior?"

"…For a man, you certainly like long-winded speeches."

"Stating *for a man* is nothing less than comparing me with the men you know simply based upon my outward appearance alone. In the first place, the creatures known as men are innumerable throughout the world, so by what standard can you judge me? That attitude… I just can't let it go. It is excessively lacking in manners. It flies in the face of my individuality, my rights."

In contrast to Fortuna's concise sentences, the madness in the boy's rambling gradually increased as he spoke.

Sensing danger from his words, his actions, and more importantly, his attitude, Fortuna put Emilia behind her and

shielded her, sternly glaring at the boy as she shouted in anger.

"Enough with your self-centered babbling! Who are you?!"

Lending no ear to the boy's words, Fortuna asked him for his name once more.

These words brought a change in the boy's expression. His face blanched at the interruption in the conversation, yet his cheeks, so unenthusiastic before, slowly drew back in a gloomy smile—

Then, addressing the Emilias frozen in both past and present, he spoke.

"I am a member of the Witch Cult, the Archbishop of the Seven Deadly Sins who has been entrusted with Greed—Regulus Corneas."

CHAPTER 2

THE BEGINNING OF THE SANCTUARY AND OF RUIN

1

—Let us go back in time a trifle, to the place outside the tomb where Emilia was currently holed up.

On the grassy clearing in front of the entrance, the group that had seen her off as she went to face the Trial was currently awaiting her safe return, but—

"l broke a promise to write my love out, but it got seen by someone else first… I'm done for…"

"No matter how ya cut it, you're bein' way too far in the dumps. Man up already, geez. Gotta get it together."

A half-naked Garfiel sighed at Subaru, who was cowering as if the very world were coming to an end.

As the victim, Subaru had plenty he wanted to say toward the culprit's undaunted attitude, but the ultimate cause was Subaru's own lack of caution. His only option was to endure the shame of it.

—To cheer Emilia on and bolster her determination to take the Trial at the tomb, Subaru had spent the previous night carving all his thoughts, great and small, into the stone room's walls. There, he wrote down everything that could be expressed with words and then kept going even when words would never be enough to relay everything he wanted to say.

"But I never thought Garfiel would head in to settle his stuff first…"

"Goodness, for someone who normally tries to sweet-talk her all the time in broad daylight, what is this embarrassment over putting your feelings in text? Mr. Natsuki, is your sense of shame not rather misplaced?"

“Usually, I’m mentally prepared for her to brush it all off, so when she actually does that, I’m fine! But this time, I was serious! And this is literally a love letter I wrote in the deep of night…the most embarrassing kind of all!”

When Subaru ruefully covered his red face with both hands, Otto lowered his shoulders with a weary look.

It was not uncommon for people to get oddly excited in the middle of the night and use words that would ordinarily never come to mind. It was an established cliché to spend the next morning looking back upon it with groans of agony.

“Don’t worry ’bout it, General. It’s not like ya did anythin’ weird. If anythin’, it makes me wanna do somethin’ like that. *Love for the Lingdon man is first come, first served* and all.”

“Whether you intend it or not, hearing that from the culprit only makes it worse!”

Without malice, Garfiel’s words indicated he wanted to launch his own romantic campaign for the one he cared about—Ram. Of course that would likely end with his feelings bouncing off the iron walls Ram had put up around her heart.

It was with such exchanges that Subaru and the others awaited the end of the Trial.

With good cheer and resolve buoying her, Emilia had entered the tomb. Though the Trial had broken her heart once already and reduced her to tears, they believed she would surely overcome it this time.

“When it was Garfiel, it took around an hour. Wonder if it’ll take the same time.”

“In the case of success, I would imagine so… Ow?! And ow again?!”

“—Read the mood a little, would you?”

Just as Subaru drove an elbow into the insensitive Otto, Ram had also come over to pile onto the poor man. Ram flicked Otto’s forehead, coldly narrowing her eyes.

“You are so dense when it comes to understanding others… Are you really a merchant?”

“The way you said that hurts more than anything else…”

After a taste of those sharp words, Otto was stunned from both mental and physical pain.

“Incidentally,” started Ram, glancing at his pathetic face before turning back toward Subaru, “Lady Ryuzu…or rather, Miss Shima,

because that is what she herself wishes to be called, wanted to speak with you, Barusu. It would seem she wishes to continue last night's conversation."

"*Last night's conversation*, huh…?"

As he listened to Ram, Subaru folded his arms and furrowed his brow.

Then Garfiel's jade eyes opened wide as a thought occurred to him in the middle of the conversation. "Come to think of it…I never got a chance to ask about the details. What 'n' how much did General and Grandm…the old hag end up talking about last night?"

"Whether you correct yourself or not, everyone can still tell you're one hell of a granny's boy… Mostly, I asked about what you were like before going into the tomb. You were on my mind a lot yesterday."

"…That so…?"

Garfiel turned away with an awkward look on his face. Though he'd tried to cut ties with his past after overcoming the Trial, that didn't wipe away the days of continued regrets. It couldn't be anything but awkward.

"Anyway, my hands were full with planning yesterday on how I should go after you. That's why I got Shima to promise me to save the important conversation until *after I give Garfiel his spanking*."

"The now-spanked Garf seems dissatisfied, but what is it you postponed exactly?"

"That's…"

"—An unavoidable conversation if this Sanctuary is to be liberated."

The one who picked up where Subaru trailed off was Shima, speaking in a low voice. Her spitting image—no, one of the Ryuzus she herself was born as— was lending her a shoulder as she approached.

Her expression was hard, and her labored breathing sounded quite weary.

"I believe you were told, Young Su. Just like spirits, our bodies are constantly depleting."

"…Ahhh, I see. Ryuzu has three people to swap places with, but Shima's been kicked out of the rotation, so there's no substitute for her. That's why she's this tired, huh…"

"Normally, sleeping and rising at a set schedule keeps me from deteriorating too much…but I have little confidence I can last until

Lady Emilia returns. As such, we should speak while we can."

Even while leaning on Ryuzu's shoulders, Shima lifted her face and nodded toward Subaru with determination.

"Wait. Ya don't need to do anythin' reckless. Just have a healthy old hag take the old hag's place and—"

"It's impossible to tell who you're talking about, so let's call them Granny Shi and Granny Ryu from now on. Besides, we can't swap them around like that. This is something we can only hear from Shima's lips."

Garfiel seemed to snap out of familial concern that Shima was forcing herself to speak. Subaru wanted to respect his opinion, too, since it was sensible. But he could not say that here.

What Shima wanted to talk about was the Sanctuary's past. These were things that only Shima and the people directly related to the Sanctuary's creation could know, and that was because—

"—Only I, who entered the tomb and took the Trial, can speak of this."

"Ah…"

Bewildered by that fact, Garfiel let out a breath of realization.

Previously, when young Garfiel had gone into the tomb, it was none other than Shima who had gone in after to bring him back. As a result, Shima had seen the past there. Namely—

"The memories of the ancestor of all us replicas… Ryuzu Meyer."

—she'd seen the girl who was hidden in the replication facility in the forest, continuing to sleep within a crystal.

She was Ryuzu Meyer, the original upon which Shima and the other replicas were based. In the tomb, Shima, the replica, had experienced the memories of Ryuzu Meyer while she still lived.

Consequently, the story she would share was about the regrets Ryuzu Meyer harbored about her past, memories related to the creation of the Sanctuary itself—

"They concern the cherished hope harbored by Young Ros's family, the Matherses; the existence and objective of Her Lady the Witch, who created the Sanctuary—and they concern her daughter, Ryuzu Meyer's one and only friend."

"The Witch's daughter…?"

The implications of what Ryuzu had shared made Subaru alone raise his eyebrows, for he was the only one who sensed a special meaning behind her words.

Neither Garfiel nor Ryuzu, nor Ram nor Otto, understood; only Subaru had a suspicion that turned out to be true, a reference toward which, like it or not, he felt a longing aching in his heart.

While Subaru was still reeling from his most recent realization, Shima softened her voice, speaking as if telling a fairy tale to a child.

"It all began here, before this place was called the Sanctuary."

Her eyes held distant hope as she began to speak of memories that would surely arrive at regret—

—and yet, her gaze was filled with a longing, tender love.

2

"—What is it, I wonder? Even if you gaze at me with such eyes, I shall grant you nothing."

The unfamiliar memories began with a glare from a girl in a sour mood.

The girl had an adorable face. She had creamy hair, as if light had been dissolved, and her skin was so white, you could almost see right through her. Her round eyes were a pale blue; if her appearance exemplified one word, it was *lovely*.

Her hair was parted in two large, long twirls, and the flaring dress she wore made her look like a princess out of a picture book. As a matter of fact, the position she occupied was not that far off in terms of esteem.

When this girl turned such keen eyes toward her, Ryuzu wilted completely.

Though it was presumptuous to even compare the two, the girl before her eyes was far classier than she. Ryuzu was deficient in appearance and attire both, and their apparent ages being similar only invited greater embarrassment.

"Hmph. Silent again. Are you a boring, cowardly girl, I wonder?"

The girl gave a snort of dissatisfaction to Ryuzu, who was squirming with her face cast downward. This sour demeanor clashed with her adorable appearance, but her words still thrust into Ryuzu's heart like needles.

It was not the abuse that pained her but the disappointment. Ryuzu could hardly breathe.

"Beatrice, what is with that attitude? Did I teach you to behave

like that?"

The gentle tone of his voice made the girl's expression stiffen. *Aah*, went Ryuzu as she let go of the breath she was holding.

Someone had called out from behind the girl, which was to say, directly in front of Ryuzu. Coming out of a hut in the back of the settlement was a woman who exuded a pure-white aura.

She had long, glossy, naturally white hair and skin that seemed untouched by light. Only her eyes, lips, and the long-hemmed dress she wore barely managed to add color to her, yet she possessed beauty requiring nothing more than that.

"Lady Echidna."

Ryuzu hastily bowed her head as she spoke the name of her patron Witch—Echidna. Glancing at Ryuzu, the girl named Beatrice turned around in great haste.

"Ah, er…y-you're wrong, Mom! Betty didn't do anything… But this girl, she—!"

"If you are guilty of nothing, there is no need to be all flustered. You need only accurately convey the facts. If you truly did nothing wrong, it would not be necessary to hesitate, would it? Am I mistaken?"

"Perhaps that's true…"

Echidna was not emotional, but she was quiet, firm, and strict. Ryuzu would have interpreted this as being hard on her daughter at first, but the pouty look on Beatrice's face made her believe otherwise.

"Betty was quietly waiting outside, just like you asked, Mom. And then this girl was watching Betty from afar…so Betty called her over, wondering if she had any business with Betty."

"I see. So, you there, what do you have to say?"

"Eh…! Um, er, yes, I have no excuse. I behaved most rudely…"

Beatrice's childish explanation was the truth. When Ryuzu saw Beatrice at the edge of the settlement, she stared at the girl in a daze. Beatrice took issue with that, which was what led to the current situation.

"I was smitten with the sight of Lady Beatrice in the twilight… I am sorry."

"*Smitten*, is it…? Beatrice, do you acknowledge Ryuzu's version of the story?"

"Ummmm…"

"It would not be proper to tell you, a child, to behave more like

an adult, but your attitude is lacking in tolerance. You are indeed special, but that is not for the sake of looking down upon others. I seem to be saying this a lot."

Upon receiving Ryuzu's reply, Echidna sent some sort of stern admonition Beatrice's way. Though Beatrice seemed quite crestfallen, Ryuzu was in too great a panic to notice.

—She'd never thought that the great Witch Lady Echidna would personally remember her name.

Ryuzu lived in a tiny village, but her existence was the tiniest of all. As an apostle, she felt the joy of having the Witch of Greed herself remembering her name send a tremor running through her heart.

"I shall leave things to Geuse from here. I am sure he will work hard to give you proper guidance."

"…Betty does not like Geuse very much."

"Considering his role, being disliked by you is exactly the appraisal I wished and hoped for."

Smiling at Beatrice's disgusted face, Echidna then turned to Ryuzu.

This made Ryuzu's heart leap. She always let opportunities to speak slip and kept finding some suitable reason to distance herself from such places out of hesitation, so Echidna paying any attention to her once again was a surprise.

"That must have come as quite a shock for you, yes, Ryuzu? This girl, Beatrice, is my… She is like a daughter to me. As you can see, she has yet to learn proper manners, I am embarrassed to say."

"I am not *like* a daughter—I *am* your daughter!"

"Well, it is something like that. I believe I shall be coming here with her more frequently hereafter. Both of you will likely see each other more often, so I would like the two of you to get along nicely."

"Y-yes. Leave it to me, Lady Echidna…!"

Honored to receive a request from the Witch, Ryuzu nodded, her eyes sparkling with delight.

Ryuzu's acceptance elicited a satisfied nod from Echidna. From behind, Beatrice murmured ruefully in a tiny voice.

"…Is Betty not completely fine even when all alone, I wonder?"

“You there, girl. I am sorry; Lady Echidna was supposed to be here, but I do not see her anywhere.”

“Yes?”

Ryuzu was carrying a laundry basket when the inquirer called out, bringing her feet to a halt. When she slowly turned around, she set eyes on the one who had called her to a stop. “Wah!” she went, eyes bulging. Out of surprise, she unwittingly slackened the strength in her arms, and she almost dropped the laundry basket then and there.

“There you go.”

“Whoa… Aah, I-I’m very sorry!”

Ryuzu bowed her head to the boy, who had closed the distance with one long-legged stride and put his hand under the laundry basket. Flashing a troubled smile at the sight, the youth with blue-colored hair shook his head.

“Think nothing of it. I am sorry for speaking to you in the middle of your work. It was inconsiderate.”

“Not at all…! You are too kind, Master Mathers!”

“One must not forget to be kind to ladies, regardless of our respective positions… If I may ask one thing of you, I do not particularly like being called by my family name. Could you address me as Roswaal?”

After speaking to the apologetic Ryuzu, the boy—Roswaal—gave her a wink.

His age was around four years greater than Ryuzu’s twelve, and his height was a full head taller. Even so, it seemed like he still had room to grow, and his melodic voice was well on its way to that of an adult. The boy possessed a wicked charm possible only during the brief period between being a boy and an adult, and he was brimming with natural elegance.

At that young age, he was also the current head of the Mathers family, which governed multiple domains, and the learned man who administered the forest settlement together with Echidna, making him Ryuzu’s supervisor.

To Ryuzu and the other residents, he was someone to whom respect ought to be paid on par with Echidna the Witch.

“So, erm, as for Lady Echidna…I have yet to see her today. Beatrice does not seem to have come to her usual place, either.”

“I see; their arrival may well have been delayed. Setting Lady Echidna aside, I find it difficult to believe Beatrice would not have

come here to meet you."

"Errr… Beatrice only comes to speak to me *once in a while*…"

"You say *once in a while* only because that is what Beatrice insists on calling it, no?"

Echidna threaded gaps in her busy schedule to visit this land, with Beatrice accompanying her. Somehow, they'd had numerous opportunities to come into contact and see each other's faces during the time before Echidna finished her business.

Pfft, went Roswaal, barely containing his laughter over Ryuzu's reply.

"Beatrice is not an honest girl, you see. It is good that you do not think of her as difficult to deal with…"

"Perish the thought. She treats even someone like me extremely well. In fact, I am always making Lady Beatrice angry…enough that I was worried that she might come to hate me."

"Then you have nothing to be concerned about. Beatrice's 'hate' carries no credibility whatsoever. If she genuinely hated you, she would not create all these excuses to spend time with you."

Faced with Roswaal's toothy grin, Ryuzu half believed him and half not. Beatrice often puffed her cheeks up at Ryuzu, voicing voluminous complaints about anything and everything all the while. This was far softer than what Ryuzu knew as rejection, but in contrast, Ryuzu thought Beatrice had made unmistakable displays of hate.

"I hope that at some point, you might pick up on that girl's true feelings as well."

Seeing that Ryuzu had been pressed into silence, Roswaal murmured a comment, somehow sounding forlorn as he did. His smile became ever so slightly pained, and this caused Ryuzu's chest to tighten.

However, quicker than she could apologize over it, Roswaal's expression became one of realization.

"Teacher! I heard that you were here today, so I flew right over!"

Roswaal's eyes brightened and glimmered, his face like that of a child as he broke out into a run. With his grown-up impression thoroughly erased, the boy raced toward Echidna, the Witch in question, who sighed at the sight.

"Roswaal… I do not recall permitting you to address me as Teacher."

“This is not a day I may call you anything less. I have gained a complete comprehension of the homework you spoke of previously, Teacher. By focusing mana of the four colors at a uniform rate, one makes them into magical energy without elemental attributes. At that point, by adding the remaining two colors, one arrives at a rainbow-colored attribute—how is that?”

“I am certain I assigned only the four colors as homework. So you have arrived at six colors through self-study? What terrifying learning speed and desire to grow…or more accurately, obsessiveness? Goodness, you have surprised me.”

Echidna was praising him, a fact that made Ryuzu’s eyes bulge. Echidna was a Witch through and through; something exceeding Echidna’s imagination was far beyond Ryuzu’s own.

Hence, she could not help but smile at Roswaal’s proud look over such an accomplishment. Even to Ryuzu’s eyes, it was plain that Roswaal was very fond of Echidna. Even Echidna seemed overwhelmed by the love and respect her self-described apprentice showered onto her.

“And just what are you standing around in a daze for, I wonder? As always, you are quite a lax girl.”

“Ah… Lady Beatrice…”

While Ryuzu gazed upon teacher and student, Beatrice peered in from the side. Beatrice folded her arms, snorting at Ryuzu’s surprise with the grimacing face that Ryuzu was accustomed to. Ryuzu was so used to this scowl that she didn’t even apologize for causing it.

“Do Mom and Roswaal have something to discuss, I wonder? The two of them no longer have time to mind the likes of you. Also, that laundry basket is annoying, so shouldn’t you return to work promptly, I wonder?”

“Y-yes, I shall do just that. Then if you will excuse me.”

Cringing and bowing her head to the acrimonious Beatrice, Ryuzu departed in a hurry.

Roswaal may have said Beatrice did not truly hate her, but Ryuzu found it a little hard to believe. Then she had a sudden realization.

“Um, Lady Beatrice?”

“I’m not here for any particular reason. Merely killing time, I wonder?”

When Ryuzu resumed carrying the laundry basket, Beatrice

followed right behind her. She responded to Ryuzu's obvious confusion with a composed look on her face, and when Ryuzu resumed walking, Beatrice indeed followed suit.

Ryuzu thought about it a little. Then she decided to firmly believe in Roswaal's words.

"Lady Beatrice, if you like, could you assist me in folding up the laundry?"

"…Hah?"

Beatrice was taken aback by Ryuzu's gracious proposal that she assist in doing the chores. Her reaction made Ryuzu regret having relied upon Roswaal.

"—If it is too much for your hands alone, then there's no other choice. Betty shall assist you."

"Eh?"

"Should Betty say it again, I wonder? Now, move already. Are you going to just stand around all day, I wonder?"

Beatrice overtook Ryuzu, who had unwittingly frozen in place, rushing right past her. The instant Beatrice passed by, Ryuzu saw her expression was half-exasperated and half another entirely different emotion.

"—Ah."

Flushing, Ryuzu felt the inside of her chest heat and something well up in her eyes.

Somehow holding that emotion back, Ryuzu broke into a little run, coming up alongside Beatrice and peering at her face.

"Um! …If it is all right with you, could I leave the laundry with you for a brief moment?"

"Don't get too full of yourself—I could for a little while, I suppose."

With these words, Beatrice extended her hands toward the laundry with a reluctant look on her face.

4

—The days passed peacefully.

Various things had happened to Ryuzu before arriving in this land, both good and bad. The good had been somewhat outweighed by the bad, but it was by resiliently carrying on that she had lived to this day.

There were others who came from similar backgrounds, and

they were kind, taking care to keep young, frail Ryuzu out of harm's way.

Once, when their homelands came up in conversation, and Ryuzu said she did not have any good memories of her own, someone responded with, *Same here*, and laughed. After that, they continued with, *Let's make this everyone's homeland.*

She didn't remember the speaker. But Ryuzu had always remembered those words since.

Recently, Echidna visited the settlement with ever-increasing frequency.

Everyone was fond of the Witch, for she was the savior not only of Ryuzu but everyone in the settlement. No one could thank Her Lady enough for the salvation of being granted a homeland. Inconveniences in their day-to-day life were swept away, their needs were well met, and she asked for nothing in return for all she did for them.

It was but once, when Echidna had replied with *Pay it no mind* to everyone's thanks that Ryuzu saw her making a little smile. From that faint smile, Ryuzu felt she understood why Echidna went to such great efforts: so that she could continue to smile just like that.

Whenever Echidna visited, her daughter, Beatrice, would invariably come along with her.

Echidna, surrounded by a large throng of people when she came to the settlement, always ordered Beatrice to act freely. In the majority of cases, Beatrice spent her free time close to Ryuzu.

Child or not, being a member of the settlement meant Ryuzu had a lot of work to do. On occasion, Beatrice would grudgingly aid her with laundry and sewing. She grumpily complained she was not particularly skilled in doing laundry, but she concentrated on the work even more than Ryuzu did.

When not helping with Ryuzu's work, Ryuzu often saw her pounding away at her magic lessons.

Beatrice was clutching a book too large for her small frame and honing her mana through trial and error, in all sorts of ways. To Ryuzu, who lacked any connection to magic and was unable to even read, it seemed like anguish beyond her comprehension.

It was at those times that Roswaal, who came to meet with Echidna, would inevitably interrupt, invariably angering Beatrice and igniting her temper. Roswaal, who was normally dedicated to behaving in a most aristocratic manner, acted his own age only

when he interacted with Echidna and Beatrice.

Suffering Roswaal's teasing, it was common to see Beatrice go red in the face as she launched her counterattacks. Whenever Ryuzu caught a glimpse of the pair's magical duels, she always smiled at the sight of them fighting like siblings.

From time to time, Echidna would happen upon their quarrels, making both Roswaal's and Beatrice's faces go pale, a sight that made everyone in the settlement laugh.

Echidna, Roswaal, Ryuzu, even Beatrice—everyone laughed a little.

—For Ryuzu Meyer, these days in her new homeland were happy, happy, happy times indeed.

5

"These are fragments of the memories I have gathered together… I had meant to organize them in chronological order in my own way, but I have found that telling a story from the memories of another person—even when they belong to the person closest to me above all others—is still quite a difficult thing."

Shima was carefully choosing her words and memories as she spoke of Ryuzu Meyer's past.

Perhaps she was accustomed to drawing on memories, for her relaxed tale flowed smoothly. From her pause in that tale of the past, the cast around Ryuzu Meyer seemed to be complete for the moment. However—

"—Perhaps I should say Lady Beatrice has not changed at all?"

"My opinion about that's the same as yours…but there's something…before that… Way before that."

Beatrice—Subaru had received a shock just from discovering that she appeared in Ryuzu Meyer's memories. But at the same time, it wasn't difficult to come to terms with.

He'd known to begin with that Beatrice was Echidna's contracted spirit from four centuries prior. Echidna had worked with Roswaal's ancestor to build the Sanctuary and ordered Beatrice to stand watch over the archive of forbidden books at Roswaal's mansion and await That Person after Echidna's own death.

As a consequence, he could accept that Beatrice had entered and left the Sanctuary prior to that time.

“This *Lady Beatrice*… Certainly, she would be the one at the marquis’s mansion, of whom I have heard nothing but her name? I have not yet had the opportunity to meet her…”

“Yeah, that Beatrice. So she really is connected to the Sanctuary… Plus, she transported me to the Sanctuary back then…”

Nodding after Otto checked with him, Subaru mulled over a memory from a previous iteration of the loop.

The last time around, when he’d gone to rescue the mansion, Subaru had been unable to save a single person from Elsa’s vile blade, going right down to letting Beatrice die before his very eyes. And when it was Subaru’s turn to have Elsa rob him of his life—Beatrice had transferred Subaru to the Sanctuary.

“Even if she was using the Passage, it bothered me when I tried to figure out how she could spirit me all the way to the Sanctuary. If the Passage can only send people flying to places familiar to you, then to her, the Sanctuary has to be…”

For Beatrice, it was surely a place filled with memories. Perhaps it was essentially her homeland.

That was how, in that emergency situation, Beatrice had enabled Subaru’s escape to the Sanctuary.

“—I dunno about the little shrimp, but I’m payin’ more attention to the Witch. I knew this was the testing grounds of the Witch of Greed, but I never had a chance to hear about the Witch herself.”

“Wait, what? Garfiel, you’ve never met the Witch?”

“Er, I hate to put it this bluntly, but is your question not rather unusual, Mr. Natsuki?”

Otto was dubious about Subaru’s reaction, but Garfiel’s murmur from a moment before wasn’t something Subaru could let go.

The tomb was Echidna’s resting place, and Garfiel held the qualifications to challenge the Trial within as an Apostle of Greed. Subaru had assumed those weren’t qualifications anyone could obtain without meeting Echidna first.

“But from the way you put it just now, Echidna never came out during your Trial, right? So how did you figure that you’d overcome the Trial?”

“General, the way ya put that makes it sound like you met the Witch… As for me, I settled it, that’s all. I didn’t meet the Witch. Won’t talk about what happened inside no more.”

Garfiel avoided speaking clearly about the contents of his Trial

while answering the question relating to the Witch. When Subaru nodded in response, Ram abruptly posed a question.

“—In other words, Barusu has met the Witch of Greed?”

Slowly narrowing her pink eyes, she quietly stared at Subaru.

“…Happened on the first day, when I went into the tomb to bring Emilia back. I asked her about Ryuzu and…some other stuff.”

“

with a question. Shima nodded deeply in response.

"A great many of Ryuzu Meyer's memories are of Lady Beatrice. Just as I have told you, they seem to have gotten along very pleasantly together."

Shima's memories, which accompanied a slight softening of her expression, contained within them a version of Beatrice that Subaru knew. That girl's personality, unable to deal honestly with others, had remained unchanging since four hundred years prior. Hence, she had obstinately refrained from showing others her true thoughts, keeping various feelings stuffed inside her tiny body.

—Subaru felt sadness welling up in his chest as he thought back to Beatrice, clinging to her pact and the archive of forbidden books.

"To be honest, I'm surprised that Echidna walked around with Beatrice alongside her. So far as I know, you wouldn't think she had one shred of love for Beatrice as if she was family."

"I wonder just what conversations Young Su has had with Her Lady the Witch to make him go that far…"

"I, too, concur with our opinion. In the memories I have seen, I do not think of Her Lady the Witch as lacking in humanity as Young Su suggests…toward her daughter, her apprentice, and Ryuzu Meyer as well."

"That's… I agree with you on that."

Subaru could say it didn't match with the Echidna he knew, but that was as far as it went. It had been four centuries since her death; perhaps a period so long brought tremendous changes even to the mind of a Witch possessing such great power.

Perhaps that had resulted in a twisting of the Witch's personality, rotting her core nature.

"—Please continue your story. Up till now, you've only spoken of heartwarming memories of the past. But all of us know that a Trial doesn't end with just that."

Subaru's words made everyone present nod with various feelings in their chests.

"Life in the Sanctuary, peaceful on the surface, continued like that… So what happened?"

"*What happened*, you ask…?"

All by herself, Shima, the teller of the tale, lowered her gaze, murmuring with a weary voice.

Then she slowly surveyed the faces of all present.

"Ruin is what happened. And the true reason for the

Sanctuary's existence came to pass."

"The real reason this place exists…?"

The energy she gave off was far from gentle, and Subaru could feel it from the cold sweat on his brow. After watching that sweat form a droplet, which then fell from his chin, Shima closed her eyes, peering under the lid of her memories once more—

"That day also, Her Lady the Witch, Lady Beatrice, and Young Ros's ancestor were in the Sanctuary. The settlement was the same as always…and I thought those days would continue onward, peaceful and unchanging forever."

6

"Truly, how can Roswaal be such an annoying person, I wonder? He is almost impossible to forgive."

Clutching her knees and red-faced as she made an adorable huff, Beatrice murmured with a whiff of anger. Seeing the girl in the dress sitting on a stump and hearing her words, Ryuzu formed a vaguely pained smile.

"Does that face of yours irk me, I wonder? If you have something to say, come right out and say it."

"…Is it not because Lady Beatrice played a prank upon me in the first place that Master Roswaal had an excuse to take revenge?"

"C-could you not refer to it as a *prank*, I wonder? That was a more, yes, a more refined thing than that."

Once Ryuzu pointed out the source of the conflict, Beatrice clumsily tried to justify her actions.

Since she was honest to the bone, the girl was terrible at coming up with excuses. Though Ryuzu thought that, too, was cute, the prank the adorable girl had played on Ryuzu made it something she could not simply dismiss with a laugh.

—After all, she'd twisted space, trapping her in a meandering, looping corridor.

"Opening door after door only to find the same room each time was a rather terrifying experience for me."

"…Was it using but a trifle of Dark magic, I wonder? There is no reason to be so sore about it."

"—I see. In that case, Beatrice cannot be sore whatsoever over my using countermagic to return the favor in kind. Good to know."

"Nghhh…!"

Beatrice, taken by surprise by the voice coming from behind, found her own caught in her throat. When she looked, Roswaal was there smiling as he stood behind the stump upon which both girls sat side by side.

Beatrice's rueful expression got him to nod with an especially satisfied expression.

"What a fine face you're making, Beatrice. After Teacher's reaction, I like that look the most."

"What an impudent manner of speaking!! You are nothing more than someone blessed with a wealthy family and a smidgeon of talent, fortunate to have access to the greatest teacher in the world! Do not get carried away!"

"Lady Beatrice, I believe you are only praising him…"

Beatrice flared up, but she lacked the talent to get the better of someone who was an expert at teasing, such as Roswaal.

Just like with their magic duels, Roswaal always seemed to have the upper hand. Hence, the exchanges between the pair, which flew right over Ryuzu's head, had become a daily fact of life.

"Ryuzu, do tell me if Beatrice troubles you in some way again. I shall immediately chastise her and give her butt a good spanking."

"Ha! Would this girl depend upon you in the slightest, I wonder?! Go on, you tell him."

"Thank you very much, Master Roswaal. I shall surely report to you if anything happens."

"Like what, I wonder?!"

Seeing Beatrice's shoulders droop and a betrayed look appear on her face, Ryuzu's expression softened. Roswaal nodded, looking like he was fully aware that Ryuzu would report no such thing. After that, he pensively inclined his head to the side.

"All that said, I am sorry to have interrupted your reading. Allow me to apologize in Beatrice's place."

"No, that is too gracious of you. Besides, I hesitate to call it reading just yet."

Shaking her head at Roswaal and his apology, Ryuzu stroked the pages of the book on her lap. This was one of the books Echidna had provided for the residents of the settlement who were unable to read but wanted to learn.

She had yet to have a firm comprehension of I-script, but she was right in the middle of learning that bit by bit.

"Hmm… Can reading books be anything but good, I wonder?

Reading leads to a more bountiful life."

"Beatrice has truly taken the words straight out of Teacher's mouth—Actually, Beatrice, since you're already with her often, how about becoming Ryuzu's teacher?"

"You mean Betty would be this girl's…?"

For an instant, Roswaal's suggestion made Beatrice widen her eyes, reacting as if he was teasing her. But Ryuzu was more surprised than Beatrice.

"Th-that is simply—! I could not impose such trouble on Lady Beatrice, who is very busy…"

"—Is it a real problem, I wonder? This much is child's play."

Perhaps out of her sense of rivalry toward Roswaal, Beatrice crossed her arms and accepted the role of Ryuzu's teacher. When Ryuzu was agape at her reply, Beatrice asked, adding a snort at the end, "What, I wonder? If you do not like it, Betty has no intention of forcing it upon you. It is not as if Betty is particularly enthusiastic about—"

"No, if Lady Beatrice will teach me, I would be very happy."

Beatrice had been the impetus behind Ryuzu wanting to study how to read in the first place. Having fallen in love with the sight of her always carrying around that large book, Ryuzu came to hold an interest in reading all her own.

If she could ask Beatrice to teach her, that would be a great honor.

"I-if you insist, what choice is there, I wonder? You are a truly fortunate girl."

Instantly, Beatrice averted her face, blushing happily as she responded to Ryuzu's plea. Toying with her extravagantly curled hair, Beatrice seemed set to continue rambling—

"Lady Beatrice?"

"…Is Mother calling, I wonder?"

Abruptly, the nature of Beatrice's expression underwent a great change as she hopped down from the stump. Glancing at the perplexed Ryuzu out of the corner of her eye, she proceeded to motion her hand toward a house close by.

"Roswaal, Mother is calling for you as well. Is this an emergency situation, I wonder?"

"I understand. You do as Teacher instructs. I shall…"

With that exchange of few words, Beatrice smoothly glided through the open doorway. But she was not seen on the other side

of the door; she had surely crossed over to a distant place the moment she passed the portal's threshold.

"—The circumstances have changed somewhat. For the moment, come with me to where Teacher is."

The look on Roswaal's face allowed no second-guessing. Without a word, Ryuzu could not help but obey.

—She felt as if she sensed some kind of disquieting wind at the horizon of the cloudless sky.

7

—The atmosphere had grown heavy and strained. Ryuzu felt like her own blood was drying up.

"We should flee from here immediately. We are not prepared yet; if he appears in this place here and now, the project will be ruined. Rebuilding will become impossible."

"

“—However, there is not yet a sufficient ‘core’ with which to activate the barrier.”

Roswaal was on the verge of seizing a new hope, but Echidna’s chagrin-tinged words made him draw in his breath.

“Without the all-important core, the barrier cannot be activated. Without the barrier, it is impossible to repel him. If we cannot maintain a complete security net, he will surely destroy us.”

Roswaal, ruefully hanging his head, pounded the table with his strongest fist up to that point. The legs of the old table creaked, and Roswaal’s torn fist oozed with blood.

Silence filled the interior of the cabin. The passage of time slowed, and the weight of the air could be felt on one’s skin.

It was then, as if to defy that gloomy atmosphere, that one timid girl—Ryuzu—raised her hand.

“Regarding that insufficient core…might I be of service?”

“Ryuzu…?!”

As Roswaal gaped, Ryuzu slowly shook her head and looked at Echidna.

“I heard of this some time ago. Namely, that I meet the conditions for the core of the barrier that Lady Echidna is building…and that this is why you set eyes upon me.”

“—From Beatrice, perhaps?”

“Yes.”

With quiet resolve resting within her, Ryuzu nodded in response to Echidna’s question without fear. Her bold demeanor made Echidna the Witch open her eyes wide. Ryuzu recalled when Echidna had been surprised by Roswaal. She took a small measure of pride at having been able to do the same.

“According to Lady Beatrice, Lady Echidna had told her that I am extremely suitable for meeting these conditions. Also, I heard that Lady Beatrice has taken samples of my mana several times during these last months for this purpose.”

“If that is what Beatrice told you, then I suppose it must be so.”

With an ever so slightly hostile manner of speech, Echidna sincerely inspected Ryuzu before continuing.

“Certainly, the possibility you could function as a core for the barrier is high. With you as the core, the establishment of the Sanctuary is theoretically complete. However, that would have to wait until after your mana becomes more accustomed to this land.”

“So it cannot yet be done right now?”

“This is no ordinary barrier. This barrier must not be broken. For that sake, I have moved things forward meticulously. Over the course of years, I have gathered people with both human and demi-human blood in this land, establishing the scale requisite for this barrier. You could become the final push. But…”

Breaking off his words, Roswaal gnashed his teeth.

Ryuzu did not understand such difficult language. But if it was so difficult that even Echidna and Roswaal collaborating had not brought success, the wall that blocked their path was stern indeed.

However, though Ryuzu did not understand these complexities, there was one thing she did comprehend.

“The two of you surely have some way of overcoming this, do you not?”

Sensing their breaths catch, Ryuzu felt encouraged to go on.

“…I was saved by Lady Echidna and Master Roswaal. I have been happy coming to this land and having the chance to live without being shunned or despised. If there is a way to repay you for such precious time, I believe it will grant meaning to my life.”

Bit by bit, Ryuzu put the feelings welling up inside her into words.

Echidna coolly peered at her with her black eyes as Ryuzu clenched her fists so tightly that her hands turned white. In her stead, the expression on Roswaal, standing beside the Witch, ran thick with anguish.

“T-Teacher…”

Roswaal called out to Echidna, seemingly gasping for air. This was not an address out of trust for his teacher’s judgment. It was an address carrying the implication, *You cannot mean…*

But Echidna did not give her apprentice his desired reply. She kept her black eyes trained upon Ryuzu.

“—We will build the Sanctuary’s core by placing your Odo into a catalyst. By doing this, the time you will require to acclimate to the soil’s mana shall be shortened, allowing us to render the barrier functional.”

“If this is done, this land…this Sanctuary can be saved?”

“That would depend on the definition of salvation. However, it would surely become possible to fend off the menace closing in on us at this very moment. Per my original aim, with a long enough reprieve, we can refine our countermeasures as well.”

Echidna’s reply was not to put her mind at ease. The Witch did

not deal in optimistic assessments or sugarcoating of any kind.

If Echidna declared she could do it, she could make it a reality.

In other words, Ryuzu could repay the favor shown to her at the cost of her own life.

"…When can you begin?"

"—We can begin right away. A facility has been prepared to accept the core. What remains is the purification of the magic crystal that will become the catalyst and readying the ritual linked to the blood of the residents gathered at the Cathedral. The problem is buying time against the menace…"

"That…is my duty. Isn't that right, Teacher? I shall strive to give everything until my dying breath… Ryuzu."

Concealing the grief deep within his eyes, Roswaal turned toward Ryuzu. There was no hint of frailty in the youth's expression —only respect for Ryuzu, whose resolve was as firm as his own.

"I am sorry. I lack the power to save Teacher all on my own."

"Not at all. To me, Master Roswaal, you, too, are my benefactor, granting me time I would not replace for anything. I am grateful for this. There is nothing to resent you for whatsoever."

Placing a hand over her meager breasts, Ryuzu slowly shook her head side to side. Roswaal exhaled at her reply, whereupon he shifted his gaze toward Echidna.

"I will depart immediately. Teacher, take care of preparing the barrier…and please summon Beatrice back."

"…Would it not be better if Beatrice does not know?"

"If you do not call Beatrice now, that girl will resent you and me both for the rest of her life… Albeit, perhaps it will be so even if you do summon her."

"I see… Understood. I shall call her shortly."

Seeing Echidna nod, Roswaal headed toward the entrance to the cabin. Midway, he placed a hand on Ryuzu's shoulder, putting substantial strength into it for only a moment.

The trembling of his fingers was more proof than anything that Roswaal would miss Ryuzu's presence.

"…Lady Beatrice."

Closing her eyes, Ryuzu murmured the name of a little girl.

As Ryuzu thought of that obstinate girl who was not present, her heart ached terribly.

—Once more, the scene flipped upside down.

“Ga, hu…!”

With an anguished cry, the young man coughed up a clump of blood as he flew parallel to the ground.

The sight of him ferociously kicking up a cloud of dust as he rolled made Ryuzu unable to do anything but gape, forgetting even to breathe.

Overwhelming. It was truly an overwhelming spectacle.

At the young age of sixteen, he wielded the six colors of magic, attaining the excellence of what was essentially the highest sorcery mankind was capable of reaching. He had gained a Witch as a teacher, yet he had not lost his drive to improve further still. He was a true genius—there was no more suitable word in that world than *genius* to describe Roswaal A. Mathers.

It was this Roswaal who lay upon the ground, out of breath and spewing bloody froth.

Could one call such a spectacle anything but a nightmare? Was there any option but to be aghast?

“…You still want more?”

Gloomily, a languid-seeming man peered down at Roswaal as he spoke those words.

His age was twenty, more or less. His hair, colored a charred brown, was tied in the back, and the unhealthy-looking bags under his eyes were those of a sickly individual. The color of his face was poor, and his posture was crooked. He gave off the impression of one wholly divorced from the word *vitality*, seeming so lethargic that he barely managed to put on clothes and walk around. However, that outfit was the only thing striking and eccentric about him.

He was clad in clothing reminiscent of a jester’s, yet his posture contained not even the slightest shred of cheer. As the man walked forward, he kicked Roswaal as if amusing himself with a pebble, blood spattering up as Roswaal was sent flying in agony.

“Gahhh! Guhhh! Goah…!”

“Shut up. You’re annoying me. Depressing. Irritating. Pathetic. Dismal.”

Seemingly grumbling to himself, the man murmured, apparently without any intention of actually speaking to others. However, with each word, each step, the damage to Roswaal’s flesh increased. His bones creaked, his flesh exploded, and Roswaal’s

body crumpled, seemingly being crushed by the air as bloody tears spilled out from him.

“Well done. Very well done. You’ve tried very hard. You didn’t beat me, but you tried very, very hard. The fact that you tried so hard is good, right? …It’s useless to try anymore, you know.”

“What nonsense are you…? If I do not stop you here…gu, ah! Aaaaagh!!”

“That stuff weighs down your spirit the most. It makes your chest go bad. Makes your mood all gloomy.”

When Roswaal would not obey his words to give in, the man bent a knee with an attitude of disgust. Letting out a sigh, seemingly in a dismal mood, the man poked a finger against Roswaal’s chest.

—The next moment, Roswaal let up a scream as his limbs crumpled and twisted, his blood and flesh ruined.

“I really hate this. It really gets me down. Me doing twisted stuff like this is really the worst. It’s dismal. It’s lame. It’s disheartening. It’s dreary. It’s withering. It’s the worst. Worst of the worst of the worst—so depressing.”

“Ah—”

As Roswaal listened to those melancholic words that seemed to seep into his heart, the final murmured word seemed to land a decisive blow. Unable to withstand the additional pressure, Roswaal’s torso was “crushed.”

He coughed up a great quantity of blood, enough to convince anyone his torso had been pulped right at its center, his internal organs pushed up through his mouth. The whites of his eyes were bared, his limbs convulsed, and Roswaal fell silent.

“Ahhh, ahhh, aaah, what. What, what. What’s with thiiiis. I really hate this, my chest feels bad. My mood’s sinking. My head’s heavy. It’s depressing. Depressing, depressing, depressingdepressingdepressingdepressing—”

As Roswaal sank into a sea of blood, not moving a muscle, the man continued to vent gloomily.

Roswaal’s grand demise and the unorthodox man who had inflicted it—unable to do anything but watch the scene to its conclusion, Ryuzu, who had forgotten even to breathe, belatedly remembered how to do so at that late moment—

“Ahhh…? My heart is heavy, but it seems like there’s someone over there?”

“—!”

The instant a slight bit of air passed into her lungs, the man’s attention turned in her direction.

That fact left Ryuzu astonished. Ryuzu had been peeking at the battle from a cabin some distance away. The man had noticed her from her gaze through a gap in the crude wall and the slightest of breaths she had taken.

“Hey, you know, I’m noooot doin’ all this ’cause I want to. Taking lives pains my heart. Hearing shrieks ruins my mood. Being cursed by other people means a dreary life… Would you save me some time?”

“Eep.”

“…Depressing.”

With Ryuzu unable to move, unable to speak, the man turned a palm toward the cabin where she was frozen in place. She did not understand the principles behind it, but Ryuzu took this as the man serving her a death sentence.

Roswaal had been crushed by some kind of incomprehensible power. And now Ryuzu’s body would be contorted by this same—

“Al…goaaaaa!!”

There came a roar that literally spat flecks of blood as it summoned explosive flames, dyeing the world crimson.

An enormous amount of heat emerged from the fallen Roswaal’s raised hand. The mysterious man was assaulted by flames that seemed intent on reducing him to ashes. This was scarlet hellfire spawned from a plane of scorching heat. The tall, thin man, a menace beyond human comprehension, was suddenly assaulted from behind, his very soul burned to a—

“Breaking a sweat is so *depressing*.”

Murmuring melancholically, the man pounded the hellish flames into the ground before they arrived.

The incandescent red sphere should have scorched the man to ash, searing him out of the world altogether. Yet, it had failed to singe even a single strand of the man's hair, turning into a tiny red clump that tumbled onto the ground.

"I'm rather surprised that you haven't vanished yet. Having to use my power is so depressing, I just want to die."

When the grumbling man clenched his upraised hand, the gesture caused the sphere that had fallen to the ground to burst apart. The sound of scalding heat scorching the air echoed but once —then it dissipated, its mana completely exhausted.

—It was magic that Roswaal, on death's door, had cast with the whole of his body and spirit, hoping for a miraculous turnaround.

He'd wrung his dying breaths, and all he'd accomplished was making the strange man break a sweat. The only matter that remained was whose death—Roswaal's or Ryuzu's—would precede the other's by a few scant seconds.

"Damn you, Devil of Melancholy—!"

"What a terrible nickname. It dampens my spirits. Do you think I ended up this way by choice, hmm?"

"Even if your life has been twisted or corrupted somehow…you became your current self through the choices you made, no matter how limited they were. Don't try to pass yourself off as a victim… Devil of Melancholy, Hector!"

"A sound argument. My ears hurt. It makes me feel bad. Hmm. Truly, I do not get along well with you. That's why—"

Cutting off his own words, the man—Hector—turned his palm toward Roswaal.

"—Rgh, ghh!"

"Your bones are clattering. Your internal organs are squishing. Your heart's cracking. What are you gonna do now, hmm?"

The instant Hector spoke in a low voice, an anguished cry resounded. It was the cry of Roswaal's impending death.

This time, Roswaal truly ceased to move. Hector paid him but a glance before languidly turning back around. He looked toward the cabin Ryuzu was in—and without warning, it was crushed under the strain.

"—Uuugh, aah?!"

She was not able to endure it for even a single second.

She was smashed from above by a force that was far greater than her own mass. By some miracle, she fell forward as she collapsed to the floor; had her posture been even slightly different, her joints would have surely been bent backward and snapped.

However, that miracle achieved nothing beyond mitigating some of the agony prior to her death.

"If she isn't resisting, she's not Echidna. And if she's not Echidna, who cares about her, hmm?"

"—Wha?"

Her entire body enveloped by some inescapable strain, she felt as if she were being crushed by the air. Right after she thought Hector's distant voice would be the last thing she knew in this world, that strain suddenly vanished.

Her breaths were ragged. Her face was marred by tears and drool. Ryuzu wheezed as she lifted up her face.

"Given the situation, it is most difficult to say I've arrived on time."

There, behind the collapsed cabin, stood a white-haired Witch.

Somehow, someway, the Witch had caused the summoned force to vanish. The sight of this made Hector raise his eyebrows.

"…No, you came just in time. Your apprentice slowed me down, gallantly delaying me as a result, you see. Thanks to that, not a single thing has gone according to schedule. It dampens my mood. Really, it does."

"That style of speech… You have not changed at all. You're exactly the same as you were when we parted ways."

"Your manner of talking is the same as always, too. How did you end up with such an uncute way of speaking, I wonder? Even though you were so cute back then…"

Echidna removed her gaze from the lamenting Hector, looking at Roswaal, who lay motionless, jumbled in a pool of blood. Echidna narrowed her eyes slightly at the sight of her apprentice having fulfilled his duty to the bitter end.

"…My chest hurts more than I expected. I cannot remain objective in regards to this result…"

"In a case like this, remaining composed and without emotion would be far creepier, would it not? If you want to cry, take at least enough time to do so. I am not that heartless."

"You are the very one who harmed him so. How dare you speak such words?"

Their exchange was barbed. This pair of apparent acquaintances most certainly did not have a friendly relationship.

In contrast to Echidna, who kept her distance, Hector behaved how he normally would. There was no room to doubt Echidna's might, but Hector was also a being who exceeded all bounds of sense. Ryuzu could not even conceive of another getting the better of him in battle.

"—Just how long are you going to lay there pathetically like that?"

"…Eh?"

Suddenly seized by the collar, Ryuzu, who had been prone, found herself hauled upward. Surprised by this turn of events, she noticed by her side was a familiar girl, looking down on her with a sour face.

"Lady…Beatrice…"

"This isn't the time to lay about in a daze. All you are doing here is slowing others down… Would you leave with haste while Mother is buying time for you, I wonder?"

"B-but…Master Roswaal and Lady Echidna told me to wait here."

"…That Roswaal is now a mess on the floor. Look here, will Betty go with you, I wonder? This is doing as Mother told her—the one method through which this situation can be turned around."

Unsurprisingly, even Beatrice could not maintain her cool at the sight of Roswaal fallen and the presence of that unfathomable Devil. She was putting excessive strength into her cheeks, her expression one of scolding as she looked toward Ryuzu.

Even so, Beatrice was far stronger compared with her, who was able only to shrink and cower.

"The preparations are complete. Did Mother inform you of this, I wonder? Even you would fully understand, she said."

"—I understand."

Receiving Echidna's verbal message, Ryuzu's breath caught as she nodded. In contrast, Beatrice did not look like she understood the true meaning of those words, but this was not a place where Ryuzu had the luxury of explaining.

Behind the pair, the air grew strained as the excited mana within eagerly transformed into power. Hostilities had already commenced; a battle had begun between supernatural entities beyond the ken of normal human beings.

To reel victory in from that battle, which was beyond the realm of human comprehension, they had to leave.

“Let us go, Lady Beatrice. Where have the preparations been made?”

“…In the forest, at a building that’s emitting a disgusting scent. All Mother said to do was to take you there, through the bothersome means of Betty’s Passage, I wonder?”

Even as her implicit dissatisfaction over this slipshod explanation oozed out of her, Beatrice led Ryuzu away from the battlefield by hand. As Witch confronted Devil, they needed to make it to their destination before they were enveloped by the pair’s mutual battle.

“

Beatrice responded to Ryuzu's words with a snort and what came off as a rather haughty attitude. Ryuzu looked back fondly upon the time she took such statements at face value, rendering her deeply apologetic.

Albeit, by that time, she understood this was a form of the girl's difficult-to-discern gentleness and an expression of her deep affection.

—It would have been so wonderful to continue spending time with Beatrice like that.

"—Right now, you are smiling with a rather disconcerting look on your face."

The sharp-eyed-as-ever Beatrice pointed out the deeply sentimental face Ryuzu had shown her. But Beatrice had known Ryuzu long enough to recognize that this differed from her usual smile. The instant Ryuzu realized this, tears filled the corners of her eyes.

"I—I am very sorry…! I have a little dust in my eyes…"

"—Worry not. Do you not realize that even Betty understands you would be anxious in such a situation, I wonder? You really should keep quiet and stay right here."

Showing concern for the tearful Ryuzu, Beatrice shifted her attention beyond the facility, toward where Echidna and Roswaal had been left behind. Then she nodded to Ryuzu several times over.

"Once Betty takes Mother's side, will all be as it was, I wonder? That jerk Roswaal is on the brink of death, so I must save him quickly as well. Then after tomorrow, once more, we can…"

At a slightly rapid pace, Beatrice presented Ryuzu with a list of all the reassuring things she could think of. For but a single moment, this honest display of sympathy took Ryuzu aback in a way that was very out of place.

Immediately, the inside of her chest ran hot. Her words had provided strength. In that moment, Ryuzu was proud of Beatrice for that.

That was why—

"Lady Beatrice, thank you for looking after me for such a terribly great length of time— This is farewell."

—she rejected that solace, deciding to step barefoot toward an ordeal of thorns.

"—Eh?"

Beatrice's voice was weak as she blinked, not understanding.

Ryuzu looked back as Beatrice stared straight at her in astonishment. Hesitation and pain were welling in Beatrice's round eyes. But Ryuzu, knowing the girl's kindness, did not falter.

Up until that point, Ryuzu had immediately apologized for whatever might have displeased Beatrice. But this time alone, she absolutely could not.

"What do you mean, *farewell*…? Do you mean you're running away?"

"No, you are mistaken. If I ran away, I might hope to be reunited with Lady Beatrice again someday. However, this is farewell for life… I shall never be able to speak to Lady Beatrice again."

Tightly pursing her lips, Beatrice gazed deeply into Ryuzu's eyes in search of her true intentions. This was the first time Beatrice had allowed Ryuzu to see her so desperate. Ryuzu quietly chose her words.

She chose them from among all the words within her, for this was the single most important moment of her life.

"This facility…was designed to deploy a barrier over the forest. Eventually, I was meant to become the core of that barrier…but now, there is insufficient time for the original plan."

"Time for the barrier…and that man is in the way? Then we need to…"

"He cannot be beaten merely through fighting. That conclusion was the reason for creating the Sanctuary in the first place. I imagine the reason Master Roswaal was so devoted was because he understood that if he was not, Lady Echidna could not be saved."

That was how overwhelming a being the Devil of Melancholy was.

Not even Ryuzu understood what effect activating the barrier might have against that Devil. But it was the one and only firm promise Echidna had ever made to Ryuzu.

"If the barrier is activated, this place will become a Sanctuary. It will be protected. Lady Echidna promised this to me… Therefore, I will offer up my body for its sake."

"A-are you not speaking stupidity, I wonder?! Offering up your body… What are you saying you can do?! You know nothing of magic! You know…aaa…"

With a loud voice and a rapid mouth, Beatrice closed the distance to Ryuzu. But in the middle of her own words, the clever

girl arrived at the answer to the question that came from her own lips.

Aghast, Beatrice looked up at the blue magic crystal right beside them.

"With this crystal as the catalyst, you would make your Odo the core of the barrier…? If you do that, you can overwrite the mana of the soil without any delay in time and make this forest a Sanctuary…"

"Yes. That is what Lady Echidna said."

That was the conclusion Echidna and Roswaal had agreed upon prior to the Devil launching his assault.

Beatrice stood still, already at a loss for words. She had transported the magic crystal herself. And she knew full well Ryuzu's suitability to serve as the core of the Sanctuary—

"—By your reaction, you have guaranteed this is how it will turn out as well, Lady Beatrice."

"You are wro…! Betty… Betty had no such intention…"

Voice trembling, Beatrice lifted her face as if she'd been slapped, unable to mend her composure.

"I did not do that with Mother with the intention of… Wait, no, will you wait, I wonder? Wait. C-can Betty make a personal appeal to Mother, I wonder? Mother is soft on Betty; she will surely listen…"

"There is no time for that. A decision is required this very instant."

"Then Betty has decided to go to Mother's aid this very instant! If Mother and Betty are together, will someone like that go down in one hit, I wonder?! Betty will heal Roswaal swiftly, too, and then…"

Beatrice shook her head in denial, but her words trailed off at the end. She herself knew more than anyone how unconvincing her agonized declaration sounded.

—Beatrice was incredible. Ryuzu respected her from the bottom of her heart.

Ryuzu had always been watching her. She knew that the girl adored her mother, that her quarreling relationship with Roswaal was like one between siblings, and that she nonchalantly sent a great deal of attention Ryuzu's way.

She studied magic with the utmost earnestness, undaunted despite all Roswaal's teasing. She loved her mother, Echidna, so

much, and the smile she let Ryuzu see from time to time was adorable.

“—If Betty uses Passage so that everyone escapes from here, all will be well.”

“

of their hearts…even though it had nonetheless granted them a new homeland and a new hope.

"Right now, I understand this is what this place, what I am for."

"Then…if you understand, then why …?"

Unable to comprehend, Beatrice weakly shook her head side to side.

Faced with Beatrice's imploring gaze, Ryuzu made a bright, cheerful smile.

"It is fine. Perhaps that was how this place began, but all the time we have spent here surely changed things. Living here, being able to speak with Lady Beatrice, being with everyone…these are all choices that I made."

Until she had arrived at the Sanctuary, she had lived a life without ever having decided anything for herself. Cruelly treated as a half-demon by the world, Ryuzu had gone through innumerable bitter experiences despite her young age.

However, this place was different. Here, for the first time, Ryuzu had chosen how to live her life.

The gracious encounters she had experienced, the days she had spent resolved to make new friends—they were all decisions she had made herself.

So, too, was getting as close as possible to the girl clutching her book and trying to be just like her. So, too, was learning from that girl to better the imitation, tracing out a future where she would ask the girl to teach her even more things.

"I am not losing anything. I carry everything right here with me."

Even if she would never see the future she'd planned out, Ryuzu still treasured its happiness, its warmth.

"I have lived happily here. That is why I must go. I will protect that happiness. Lady Beatrice, I thank you very much for the compassion you have shown me many times over and many times today."

Far away, roars from beyond the building echoed.

The ground trembled, an aftershock of the battle between superhuman beings shaking the very atmosphere itself. The change was gradual, but the roars were without question drawing nearer, as if fate itself was demanding that the pair come to a true decision.

For a single moment, Ryuzu closed her eyes. She deftly concealed the faint unease within her. Directly in front of her,

Beatrice put her head to work, desperately searching for words…for the magic words that would make Ryuzu's will yield, Ryuzu's feelings waver, and make Ryuzu go back on her view.

—Such convenient magic existed nowhere in the world.

"Lady Beatrice."

When her name was called, Beatrice lifted her face, seemingly clinging to the faintest of hopes. She anticipated Ryuzu herself weaving the magic words that had not come to Beatrice herself. But —

"Make sure you do not eat too many sweets."

—in place of magic words, Ryuzu made a final request to Beatrice.

After all, when they had tea together, Beatrice was a girl who simply could not keep her hands off the sweets. She was too cute to have it go to waste by getting fat. Ryuzu wanted her teeth to stay pretty, too.

—Not that Beatrice let others see it much, but when she smiled, she was truly an adorable girl.

Turning back, Ryuzu looked at the deep, glimmering, seemingly bewitching magic crystal. All she had to do…was to touch it.

Surely, there would be neither pain nor suffering.

Though she resigned herself to her end, she did not know how it would come. Ryuzu thought she was pathetic for finding that just a tiny bit scary.

When she was swallowed up by that light, she could make the Sanctuary real.

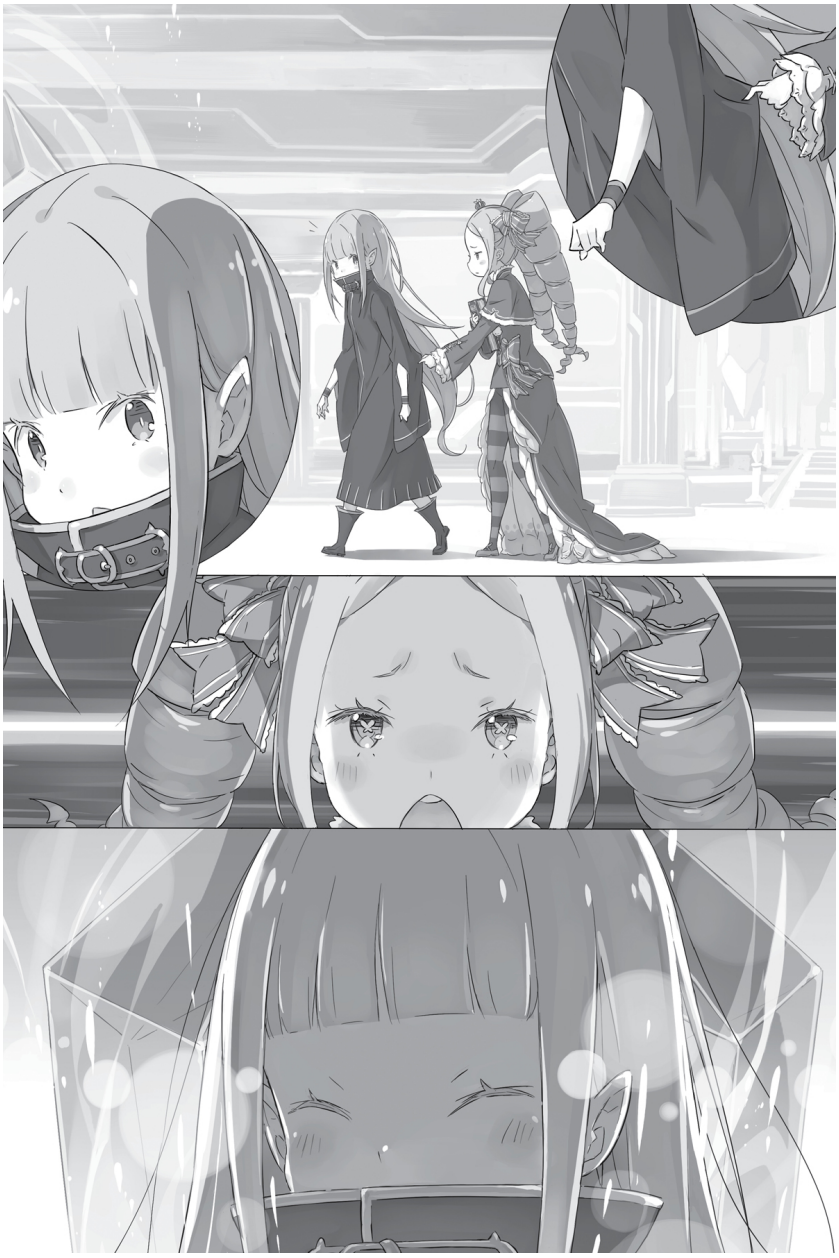
"

At the end, with their touching fingertips conveying each other's warmth, Ryuzu smiled like a flower in bloom.

She was afraid of nothing—Beatrice had blown all trace of it away.

"Thank you— Good-bye, Betty."

Having shared her affection with the one she had loved most in her life, Ryuzu's consciousness was enveloped by blue light.



10

“—These are all the memories of Ryuzu Meyer that I saw within the tomb.”

Shima bowed her head deeply, concluding what was a brief, but seemingly lengthy, tale of the past.

Subaru and the others, listening to the end with rapt faces, had no comments about Shima’s gesture. She must have endured anguish for many long years over what she had spoken about: the origin of the Sanctuary and the weight of the hidden truth about Ryuzu Meyer, the girl who was her ancestor.

“The memories end there. I have no way of knowing what happened thereafter. But from the fact that the Sanctuary continues to exist, Ryuzu Meyer’s decision does not seem to have been in vain.”

“However, this is…far too different from the existence of the Sanctuary as I know it…”

Most shaken of all of them was Ryuzu, who had been born in the same way as Shima. Occupying the same position, yet unaware of what knowledge her kin had kept locked away, the shock she felt from learning the truth was incalculable. Though not on the same level as her, Subaru could not help but be surprised by the truth, either.

“Young Su and others know where the magic crystal as well as Ryuzu Meyer ended up.”

“Yeah, it’s right there in the replication facility… But the purpose of the facility, including the crystal, is completely different from what I’d heard. Echidna didn’t say one word about the barrier, either…”

During his encounters with Echidna in her castle of dreams, she had never broached the purpose of the barrier.

Once, Echidna had falsely claimed that the Trial was unrelated to her, but his view had made an about-face. To avoid being caught by any more lies, Subaru decided that for investigating the Sanctuary’s creation and the nature of the barrier, he would check not with Echidna but instead with—

“Where did Shima…or rather, the Ryuzus hear about Echidna’s

objective?"

Echidna's objective was immortality—by transferring her memory to one of the replicas, she could establish a false eternal life. Then some kind of failure had occurred; only the construction of the replicas and would-be vessels remained, and even to the present day, their numbers continued to increase. That had been the story.

"I… We are the initial replicas assigned the duty of administrator. Intelligence…and the objective…were in our heads from the beginning. That is why we never once thought to question…"

"At first, I swallowed that hook, line and sinker myself. As a result, my thoughts and actions lost their normal functionality, and thus, I was removed from the Ryuzus' duty of administrator."

Shima nodded to the bewildered Ryuzu, having overcome that very same shock some ten years prior. It was clear Ryuzu had not taken it all in yet.

However, Shima had no time. They could not afford to wait for Ryuzu to regain her bearings.

"I'm sorry, Ryuzu, but let's move the conversation forward. I'm not surprised that Echidna hid her real goal. That's very normal of her. So about that hidden objective…"

"Mr. Natsuki, this has been on my mind from time to time, but you speak most recklessly about Witches, don't you…?"

"That's because I have a grudge against 'em. So who is this *Melancholy* who came out in the story?"

Subaru pressed about the term *Melancholy*, which had played such a prominent, conspicuous role. If it was just something Subaru didn't know out of ignorance, just like the seven Witches bearing the names of the Seven Deadly Sins, then fine. But if not—

"This is the first time Ram has heard of this Melancholy as well. Even concerning the Witch of Greed, I know little but the name… However, I have not heard a single thing of this Melancholy."

"I dunno of it, either… If it ain't Granny Shi gettin' senile, what gives?"

Faced with Subaru's question, Ram and Garfiel respectively shook their heads side to side. When Subaru looked, Otto was also shrugging, wholly at a loss, his state of confusion over the circumstances only deepening.

But Subaru had a single idea that came to mind, though it was

not one he particularly wanted to believe.

"The Seven Deadly Sins are Pride, Jealousy, Wrath, Sloth, Greed, Gluttony, and Lust…but I've heard that in the past, it was different, and there were other Deadly Sins included with the ones currently recognized."

"Where did you…? I suppose it is futile to ask… So what were these other Deadly Sins?"

"I'm…pretty sure they were Melancholy and Vanity, I think."

—Stripped out of the Seven Deadly Sins, Melancholy and Vanity could be called the "old" Deadly Sins.

If this was related to the Melancholy that was connected to the Sanctuary's past, then a Vanity might also exist.

"However, this is not only vexing but a terrible thing indeed."

At that point, no one present had any room to doubt Subaru's information, which came from uncertain origins. "Is that not so?" said Otto, at the top of the list of believers, surveying the various faces of those present. "Just by existing, the Witches of the Seven Deadly Sins left their mark upon history. And yet, there are Deadly Sins unrecorded in history? Furthermore, just from hearing of them, they seem to be brutal beings indeed. Something is definitely strange."

"In the first place, even the purpose behind the Sanctuary's creation was hidden from Lady Ryuzu. In other words, the existence of Melancholy was deliberately erased. We do not know for what purpose, but…"

"Having people with good heads on their shoulders really speeds up the conversation…"

Sighing in admiration at the speed of Otto's and Ram's respective thought processes, Subaru then looked at Shima. From the group's conclusion and everything Subaru knew based on the current state of the Sanctuary, the story of what had occurred in the Sanctuary was—

"—The whole thing is fake. The duty assigned to Ryuzu, the process to give birth to replicas—it was all camouflage to cover up the countermeasures Echidna made to deal with Melancholy, huh?"

"—It would seem that Melancholy's existence was something she had to go through such lengths to conceal."

"—! Granny!"

Subaru announced his final conclusion and when Ram agreed, Ryuzu blanched and wobbled. Instantly, Garfiel supported her by

her shoulders, gently sitting his grandmother down on the tomb's stone steps.

"Sorry, poor way to say it. But I'm not sure how I should put it…"

"No, it is fine. I have come to the same conclusion as you, Young Su… I am merely a little tired."

Lowering her eyes, Ryuzu spoke in a heavy voice. One could hardly blame her. Nor was there any reason to make her push herself.

The duty she had continued believing in for her entire lifetime had been exposed as a complete fraud. Neither Subaru nor anyone else could imagine how bitter it was to know that.

"Do you think it was all futile, Lady Ryuzu?"

"Ram…?"

Amid that silence, Ram tossed her voice toward Ryuzu as the latter hung her head. Ram crossed her arms, glancing at Garfiel, who was right beside Ryuzu, with her usual penetrating gaze.

"I am guessing you feel dejected from knowing that the duty you long believed in was a false one. However, Lady Ryuzu, was the time you spent in the Sanctuary that of duty alone?"

"

Beatrice's heart like a curse, continuing to throb with the pain of a wound that would not heal.

He finally understood why Beatrice had rejected Subaru and why it was her true and honest wish to be allowed to die.

The wound in Beatrice's heart from having lost her one and only friend had remained a scar ever since. The hope she had clung to afterward, of meeting That Person just as her mother had commanded, had gone unfulfilled, and time had worn away her soul.

—The four hundred years Beatrice had spent was a blank, with her empty hand still extended toward what she had lost.

"…Ryuzu, has Beatrice ever met you or the others?"

"No, she has not. Lady Beatrice has not set foot upon this land ever since we replicas have been born. I, too, have always wondered: Is she not someone we should meet?"

So spoke Shima, acting as a representative for the replicas. Subaru partially concurred with her opinion.

In the end, replicas were different from the original, and even if Beatrice met Ryuzu and the others, it would not be a reunion with Ryuzu Meyer. Her wound would only widen. But.

"That was Ryuzu Meyer's final wish, right? That this place would become a Sanctuary, where everyone can smile…and she wanted Beatrice to be part of that."

"I suppose so. That was not what happened, but…"

"Certainly, four hundred years is a bit overdue…but it's not too late, either."

Beatrice's wound hadn't healed because for her, time had remained stopped.

No matter how small the wound, it would not heal if time did not advance. That was why—

"—This time, I'll smash her stopped time apart."

Subaru clenched his fist, thrusting it out as he spoke with firm resolve.

A fire had been lit inside his chest. In the back of his eyes, he saw the light. Ahead of his arm was a girl he wanted to reach.

"…I have been ever fearful that lifting the barrier might trample upon the wishes of our ancestor Ryuzu Meyer."

Hearing Subaru's declaration, Shima slowly shook her head as she spoke. The sway of her long light-pink hair came off to him as a tangible display of the unease inside her.

“With the passage of time, eras change as well. There was a time when our brethren, once called Cursebloods, were driven to this place…but those of mixed blood have been treated better of late. I was deceiving myself, using my ancestor’s wish as an excuse.”

“…I understand why you’re worried. This isn’t completely separate from the issue of blood, but there’s still discrimination based on outside appearance here and there. Even if you go outside the forest, you might have some bitter experiences. But.”

Arising in the back of Subaru’s mind was the sight of the royal selection candidates assembled in the palace.

In that court, Emilia had put her own will into words, facing and enduring the malice directed toward her head-on. Her ideals had begun to blaze a path to the world Ryuzu Meyer wished for.

At the very least, that was what Subaru believed. And he believed Emilia would succeed.

“When Emilia brings that about, the finished Sanctuary will begin again. When everything is set right, anyone will be able to call the whole world a Sanctuary.”

Emilia would spare no effort for that sake. He couldn’t speak firmly for all the other candidates, but he figured at least half of them were the sort of people to work for the greater good.

It was Subaru’s role to support her from close by until someday, her ideals were extolled far and wide.

“A fantastic tale that is comfortable to the ear… They are fine-sounding words and nothing more.”

“But me, I’m all in!”

When Shima loosened her lips, making that listless murmur, Garfiel vigorously pounded his chest. Smiling with a show of his sharp fangs, Garfiel nodded to Subaru, his face clear of all doubt.

“Don’t let it end with just words, General… Even if ya have to give the Princess…Lady Emilia a good kick in the butt!”

“I won’t treat Emilia-tan’s cute butt roughly like that. But I get you.”

Shima seemed dazzled by the enthusiastic exchange between Garfiel and Subaru.

“The whole world beyond this Sanctuary…will become a Sanctuary itself, you say?”

“When that time comes, it’ll be a crying shame to stay cooped up in here. As for the people giving off those disbelieving looks, you can bet I’ll be right there with a smug look on my face telling them

I was the first guy on board."

"*Fu, kuku.* I see… No doubt you will."

Shima humored Subaru's comedic manner of speaking with a smile. Judging from Shima's expression, it seemed as if she had set down a heavy, long-carried burden—no, that was indeed fact. She had finally laid it to rest.

And in setting down the heavy burden she had always carried alone, she could begin walking forward anew.

"Looks like we'll all be walking side by side going forward… Er, Shima?"

"…Oh, I have hit my operating time limit, nothing more. I've worked a little too hard for someone my age."

Wobbly, Shima made a flippant reply as Ram supported her frail frame. From Shima's words and the sleepy way she hung her head, Subaru could tell she had certainly reached her limits.

She'd reached the limit of a replica, relying on a faint supply of mana and being able to be active only at certain times. Talk of the past was over. They would let Shima sleep, her duty fulfilled. The rest had been entrusted to Subaru and the others.

"Sorry to push you so much. But you told us the things I wanted to ask and more. Thank you."

"—It's in your hands, Young Su."

When Subaru thanked her, Shima offered only a vague reply. After that, she placed her weight on Ram as her consciousness gently let go. The next time she would awaken was likely the next day, after everything had been decided.

"Yeah, those hopes from four hundred years ago are in my hands now… And they're really heavy…"

They were not something he could entrust to another and of course not something he could drop at his feet. He carried them in both arms, and if even that was insufficient, he'd beg and borrow other people's hands.

"Either way, I want to let Shima rest… Ram, can I leave this to you?"

"Garf's run-down shack…or rather, Lady Shima's hideaway is closest."

"Hey, if you're headed there, then I can go with…"

"Ahhh, please wait. Garfiel, it is too soon for you to push yourself. If you wish for Miss Ram to have an escort, let us ask Miss Ryuzu to do so."

“Ahnnn?”

As Ram embraced Shima, Garfiel tried to volunteer his assistance when Otto stopped him. That action made Garfiel growl, but Ram went, “I suppose so,” casually agreeing.

“If crude, rude Garf comes and interferes with Lady Shima’s rest, we would be putting the cart before the dragon. I would have a guilty conscience if I left insensitive, inconsiderate men at her side instead of Lady Ryuzu.”

“Yes, preci… Huh?! When you said *men* just now, did you include me as well?!”

Ignoring Otto’s shout of disagreement, Ram took Shima and Ryuzu with her and left. As these three people with similarly colored hair departed, Otto went, “Hmm,” cocking his head pensively. “I imagine it is likely that Ram still suspects us.”

“Well, Ram’s intuition is real sharp, so it’s completely possible. But the fact that she let us go means…no, the fact that she cooperated with us in the first place means she’s on our side, I’m pretty sure?”

Nodding deeply at Otto’s comment, Subaru bowed his head toward Ram’s already vanished back. He couldn’t hold a candle to her.

“Hey, don’t go leavin’ me in the dark! What gives? Explain already. If ya let stuff like this go, it’s just like *Morglello’s Ten and One*, damn it!”

It was there that Garfiel, completely unable to keep up with the conversation, howled in a loud voice. “About that,” said Subaru to the angry Garfiel, “you getting ticked off puts us in a bind, which is exactly why I wanted to keep that wild card Ram out of this. It doesn’t feel like that meant all that much, though… She’s probably hiding how run-down she is, too.”

“Keep Ram out of this? Hey now, I still don’t understand what the heck you’re talkin’ about…”

“—From this point, we shall be intruding upon Marquis Mathers’s abode, you see. With Garfiel’s two hands, and two people who are deadweight, I am sure we can manage somehow.”

As Garfiel fell silent while struggling to decide how he should react, Otto winked at him. Glancing toward the pair, Subaru kept thinking about the tomb—and Emilia’s Trial.

“Really gotta get back here before Emilia-tan comes all chest out and proud…”

CHAPTER 3

THE DAY ALPHA ORIONIS LAUGHED

1

—The tale now returns to the forest of a hundred years past, the time of the Trial that was being visited by a single girl.

"I am a member of the Witch Cult, the Archbishop of the Seven Deadly Sins who has been entrusted with Greed—Regulus Corneas."

—The way the boy introduced himself with a laugh was the quintessence of an anomaly.

At a glance, the boy had assumed no discernible stance, instead looking full of openings. His eyes were filled with composure and conceit that would be nonexistent in a wary person. His face projected that he could not even conceive of the slightest harm being done to him.

In peaceful times, or if he was inside a formidable fortress, there would be no problem with that whatsoever. However, the boy was an uninvited guest, and right in front of him was Fortuna, her enmity high and a grave look in her eyes.

To maintain that posture even under such conditions blew right past composure into the surreal.

But the man—Regulus—was anomalous in having forced others to accept his existence.

And Emilia also remembered the title this man bore.

"An Archbishop of the Seven Deadly Sins from the Witch Cult… that's like the people who attacked the mansion and Earlham Village…!"

She'd heard that *Archbishop of the Seven Deadly Sins* was a title granted to the leaders commanding the Witch Cult—the group that had turned its enmity toward Roswaal Manor and Earlham Village,

and thus, the trigger for the villagers taking refuge in the Sanctuary. The other thing she'd learned was that one of those Archbishops had been personally after Emilia and that another was a bitter foe responsible for Rem's unnaturally long sleep.

"Why is a person like that in this forest…?"

"—Archbishop Regulus Corneas! Why are you here?!"

It was Geuse, standing in the forest of the past, who shouted in a shrill voice the question Emilia also desperately wanted to ask. His expression was grave, as if he were a wholly different person than the one who had shown such benevolent love toward the young Emilia and Fortuna.

"I was promised that no one save me would involve themselves with this forest and this incident!"

"*Promised*? That's an arrangement you arbitrarily declared and started with an arbitrary decision, right? Quite a conceited little spirit, aren't you, trying to push that onto other people and make them obey it. There are limits involving other people's wills and thoughts, so would you stop intruding upon my mind and body already?"

"That is not an answer! If you do not like the arrangement, then you should have raised the issue at the church! Yet, you showed your face here! To start with, who told you about this pla…?"

The angered Geuse and the sour Regulus seemed to be mutual acquaintances of some sort. But there was not a single shred of affection between them, nor did their conversation hold any hope of compromise.

However—

"—That is because I instructed him to do so."

Abruptly, the gentle, bell-like voice of a woman interrupted the heated exchange.

A look of fright appeared in Geuse's eyes, and Fortuna's were filled with anger. Inside her mother's arms, young Emilia's teary eyes became clouded, and Regulus's lips curled into a vile, malevolent smile.

And as she viewed the past, Emilia gasped in shock; Echidna merely gaped.

—Slipping through gaps between the trees of the forest, the sight of a single girl appeared at that place.

The girl came to a halt, lining up side by side with Regulus to face off against Emilia and the others. She was a girl with inhuman,

terrifying beauty, enough to make those who set eyes upon her unable to stop themselves from trembling.

Her long, seemingly transparent platinum hair gave off a soft glow like sunlight personified, creating a waterfall of light that traveled from her slender shoulders down her back. Her eyes, rimmed with long eyelashes, were deep blue, almost like they were trapping the world within. Altogether, her facial features were excessively lovely and seemed like the ideal image of "beauty" harbored by human beings.

Her small body seemed so delicate that the thought of carrying her felt precarious. She was clad in but a single sheet of fabric, yet the very idea that anything was permitted to touch her bare flesh seemed unreal.

If, truly for instance, it was possible to kill through beauty alone, it was such "beauty" she possessed.

"What is the matter, Archbishop Romanée-Conti?"

The girl with looks that could kill inclined her head, posing that simple question.

Her tone, the casual glance, the mere fact this girl had made time for him—these things had the potential to give a normal man such an overwhelming feeling of happiness that it wouldn't be strange if his heart simply stopped.

Anyone could understand with one glance—this was a dangerous being who could not be allowed to exist in that world.

"Why…why are you here…Regulus Corneas?! Why have you brought *her*?!!"

Geuse gritted his teeth, seemingly to reject the difficult-to-resist urges welling up within him. This blood-tinged rejection made Regulus snort with a thoroughly exasperated look on his face.

"Are you saying I brought her here? Now, just hold on a minute; I resent people who arbitrarily decide those kinds of things. You know I despise coercing someone more than anything else, right? Her accompanying me is of her own volition. Do you have a grudge against me to make anything and everything my fault?"

"Archbishop Corneas, our friend seems confused. Do not be too hard on him."

It would not have been strange for such a statement of rebuke to set off Regulus's temper. In spite of this, Regulus respectfully bowed, and the corners of his lips curled in enjoyment.

Written or spoken words were no longer sufficient to describe

the abnormality of the vile man.

"This is… Is this not too cruel even for you, Lady Pandora…?!"

Geuse's voice, nearly out of breath, made the girl break into a thin smile.

The girl's charming smile encouraged a feeling of happiness that rivaled all the blessed things in the world. The forbearance of the girl named Pandora, forgiving all that surrounded her, was a boon to the world.

She spread her slender hands, as if her dainty arms could embrace anything and everything.

"Now, bring the Key and the seal here—so that the Witch Cult's greatest desire may be fulfilled at last."

"Pandoraaaaaa—!!"

The girl's gentle declaration overlapped with Fortuna's harsh cry.

Shielding young Emilia behind her back, Fortuna howled as she summoned blue lights around her. These bright points transformed into long stakes of ice, in such great numbers that they filled Emilia's vision, their sharp tips aimed toward Pandora.

"Oh my."

"I'll make it up to Brother by turning you into a pincushion!!"

As Pandora casually stood there, Fortuna mercilessly launched a magical barrage at her.

The ice stakes, each as thick as an adult's arm, bore down on Pandora with incredible force. The sharp tips impaled the astounded girl's face; fragments of shattered ice daubed the forest white.

"With *this*, you will be no more—!!"

Furiously contorting her beautiful face, Fortuna cruelly brought the glimmering scene to an emphatic end. The forest sky parted, and a giant mass of ice fell, directly striking Pandora. The cold gravestone smashed into the earth.

The spectacle left young Emilia, and the Emilia of the present, unable to make a sound.

Even borrowing Puck's power, could Emilia employ magic to rival what her mother had just done? She hadn't intended to underestimate Fortuna, yet her combat ability was far above her expectations, shocking her. But—

"—Now, hold on. Right now, you're not even paying attention to me, are you? Yet, the fact is that despite this, you attempted to

involve me in your attack regardless… What's with that? That's trampling on my life, my existence, my rights, and my very humanity, is it not?"

They heard deeply resentful lines emanating from within the white haze. The next moment, the fallen glacier broke apart. The sight of Regulus standing leisurely in the middle of that surreal scene of glimmering ice fragments was terrifyingly abnormal. And Pandora, standing behind him unharmed, was similarly disconcerting.

Though Regulus lightly brushed off his jacket, not only was he unharmed, but his clothes were not marred in the slightest in spite of the tremendous attack. All Pandora did was fix her hair, askew from the wind.

Regulus had likely stepped in front of Pandora to shield her, but the phenomenon was not a matter of defensive ability alone. Emilia couldn't even begin to grasp what had happened.

"So that is the Greed of this age. When I consider this encounter is normally impossible, it is deeply interesting indeed."

"…Echidna, do you know what happened just now?"

Emilia posed the question to Echidna as the latter departed from the shade of the trees, shifting to a location from which it was easier to observe the battle. Echidna lifted the corners of her lips as she frowned at Emilia, who'd moved right beside her like it was the natural thing to do, but she immediately sighed and spoke.

"I can hazard a guess, but I am far from certain. I would have liked to observe the situation a little longer before speculating about his Authority…but it would seem the circumstances will not permit it—They are on the move."

Emilia felt vexed by how authoritatively Echidna seemed on everything they were watching but decided to focus her attention on the past.

Fortuna gritted her teeth at her initial attack being fended off. Geuse stretched an arm before her.

"Lady Fortuna! Please take Lady Emilia and retreat from this place! At present, we are entirely too powerless against Regulus Corneas!"

"No…! Are you telling me to back off with *that* woman in front of me?!"

"Please think of the situation! Who are you protecting right now?!!"

“Urk…!”

Geuse scolded Fortuna for her aggressive position. His comment made her open her eyes wide; Fortuna remembered that her beloved daughter, right behind her, was clinging to her clothes.

“M-Mom…”

“Emilia…”

As Fortuna picked young Emilia up into her arms, Geuse spoke with a calm voice.

“Please withdraw. And immediately seek aid from the settlement. I and the believers who came with me share a common wish. They will surely be of aid to you.”

“But if we do that, what will become of you?”

“—Rest at ease. I do not intend to simply stay behind without a plan.”

Countering Fortuna’s morose gaze, Geuse responded with a smile, even while tension oozed from every pore he had.

In response to that proudly smiling face, Fortuna closed her eyes tight, as if severing all reluctance asunder.

“I will come back to save you— I will.”

With young Emilia in her arms, Fortuna raced into the forest, leaving those words behind.

Writhing within her mother’s arms, young Emilia desperately shouted toward the fast-receding Geuse.

“Geuse—!!”

That youthful, tender love brought a peaceful smile to Geuse’s face as he raised his hand. From there, Emilia receded deeper into the forest, from where she could see Geuse’s slender figure no more.

In spite of that, the scene, which Emilia surely had no memory of, continued on. This threw her into confusion.

“Geuse got separated from us… What’s going to happen to the Trial now?!”

“Naturally, it will continue. This is a past you did not set eyes upon, but the book of knowledge is working to adjust the course of this replicated world. Considering this is a Trial, however, you should pursue your own self. What will you do?”

Replying to Emilia’s question, Echidna unexpectedly stated she should go after Fortuna.

That option tempted Emilia’s heart. Of course, Emilia’s objective was to break past the Trial. She had no room to doubt that she should pursue her own past for that sake.

However, this was where Geuse had fought so boldly, a battle for which he had put everything on the line so that Fortuna, and moreover, young Emilia could escape. Besides—

“Heh, you’re staying?”

“Echidna, from how you spoke just now…it feels like you are saying there isn’t a particular reason to do so.”

“

outstretched hand stood untouched, unable to halt his determination.

“Hey, don’t tell me that you…!”

Geuse had taken out of his habit a small black box. Setting eyes upon that little box, Regulus momentarily knit his brow, but he immediately gazed in astonishment as he realized just what it was.

Geuse shot Regulus, all his initial composure fallen away, a look of determination.

“Surely, you feel it? After all, this is something you, too, once held in your hands.”

“I can tell what it is. It is because I can tell that I have no words for the level of your stupidity. Did you convince yourself that this is your trump card? I wonder why you don’t get it……given that *you* are the one who said, who decided, that you aren’t qualified to have that!”

“Certainly, I lack compatibility. Accordingly, I have always simply carried this on my person, protecting what I was entrusted with. However, doing so was for the sake of a time like this.”

Unlike the aura of indignation Regulus had borne up to that time, Geuse was composed as he shook his head side to side.

It was as if black, stagnant anger and determination like a blue flame were smashing together inside him—

“—Archbishop Petelgeuse Romanée-Conti.”

Pandora, having not moved a step from her initial location, smiled as she spoke to Geuse.

That was his name. Addressed as such, he lifted his head. Pandora spoke gently to Geuse.

“I bid you a pleasant journey.”

They were words of blessing, filled not with malice, not with enmity, not with ulterior motives but with goodwill.

That strange dissonance was why Emilia could not stop shuddering from the ring of those words. It was the same for Geuse.

With an expression revealing the pain he tasted as Pandora’s blessing sliced into his heart like a blade, Geuse opened the black box in his palm— There was a wriggling black *something* within the little box.

“—Master Flugel. Please forgive me.”

Speaking this, Geuse pressed that black *something* against his chest, tiny box and all.

Instantly, the mysterious murk scattered as if water had

splashed on Geuse's chest, explosively increasing in volume until it enveloped Geuse's entire body. The sight of Geuse seemingly engulfed by a slimy living creature made Emilia raise an incoherent cry. *Something* was mercilessly blotting out Geuse's very existence.

"Fool."

For the first time, Regulus spat out but a single, brief word of disparagement.

At the tip of his reproachful glare, Geuse raised both arms to the heavens, screaming from his open mouth as *something* swallowed him whole. It was as if his existence were being clawed away, giving way to agony, delight, and indescribable feelings that were neither.

—Abruptly and eerily, the sound of out-of-place clapping mixed with that of the scream.

"Marvelous."

With a murmur of admiration, Pandora's eyes were moist, like those of a maiden in love.

Staring at Geuse, gasping as his very existence fell into chaos, she surreptitiously let out a heated, excited breath.

"Lady Pandora?"

It was not only Emilia and Echidna who found this abnormal. Even Regulus seemed to feel the same. The white-haired young man shot her a questioning look, to which Pandora responded by interrupting her applause, pointing at Geuse.

"Archbishop Regulus Corneas."

"Yes?"

"He's coming."

The next moment, Regulus found his body suddenly inverted as he was hurled high into the sky.

"Huh—?"

It was as if some angry child had grasped a doll by its feet before hurling it with all the force a child could muster.

Sent flying, Regulus made it clear on his face he had no idea what had transpired as he flew past the tops of the trees, instantly reaching a zenith, and from there on, he precipitously fell toward the ground. Cast down as if his feet were still in a child's grasp, there was nothing Regulus could do as he was slammed headfirst into the ground, kicking up a large cloud of smoke.

With a roar and a tremor, the ground exploded, and one tree fell after another, caught up in Regulus's point of impact. The man

was crushed under the additional impact of the great trees, and silence befell the boisterous forest.

"—Ah."

Emilia lost her voice as she desperately tried to piece back together the string of scenes that had just happened.

—She hadn't seen any of it. But there was a single thing she did understand.

"It is aaaas…I told you."

She saw the front of the man in the black habit kneeling on the ground, tears of blood flowing from his eyes.

Glaring at the cloud of dust kicked up between the gaps in the trees, that single man—raggedly coughing at the victory he had won in exchange for all his resolve—rose to his feet, pulling away from the agony of the black *something* eating away at him.

His breaths were shallow, his legs unsteady. However, his soul burned hot from the flames of unyielding determination.

"Here lies hope…and the great, unforgettable debt of gratitude I owe to the people of this place…"

Mixed with his blood-tinged coughs was a sense of solemn duty that seemed to claw at his mind even as he spoke. Over many years, his feelings must have grown and grown; just how deep they ran, none could see.

None save the man himself, who gave himself over completely in service of that wish so that he might not forget what was dearest to him for even a single moment.

"Those days, that bond, that wish…these, they gave, granted unto me. No matter how much time passes, I shall forget nothing… That is why, this moment, if I am still fit enough to cough blood…"

Tears of blood flowed freely. His blood and flesh were at their limits, and the man heaved up a clump of blood as he stubbornly clung to blessings beyond his reach.

His eye sockets were vivid crimson. Drenched in blood, his pupils were unfocused; even as he gazed straight ahead, it was doubtful whether he truly saw the world as it was.

"Just what do you see with those scarlet-hued eyes, Archbishop Romanée-Conti?"

"—Love."

It was none other than Pandora, standing at the receiving end of that gaze, who gathered astutely that his crimson eyes were not looking at her. When she paid no heed to this and posed her

question, the man replied without hesitation.

Ironically, it was an exchange between two people who had been brought to the same place, two people who could absolutely not accept the other's way of thinking.

"In this world, at this moment, it is likely me who loves you most."

Enraptured, Pandora made her confession with heated breath. Those words made the man close his eyes but once, whereupon the man bared his fangs toward the woman who dared to act like she understood him most in the world.

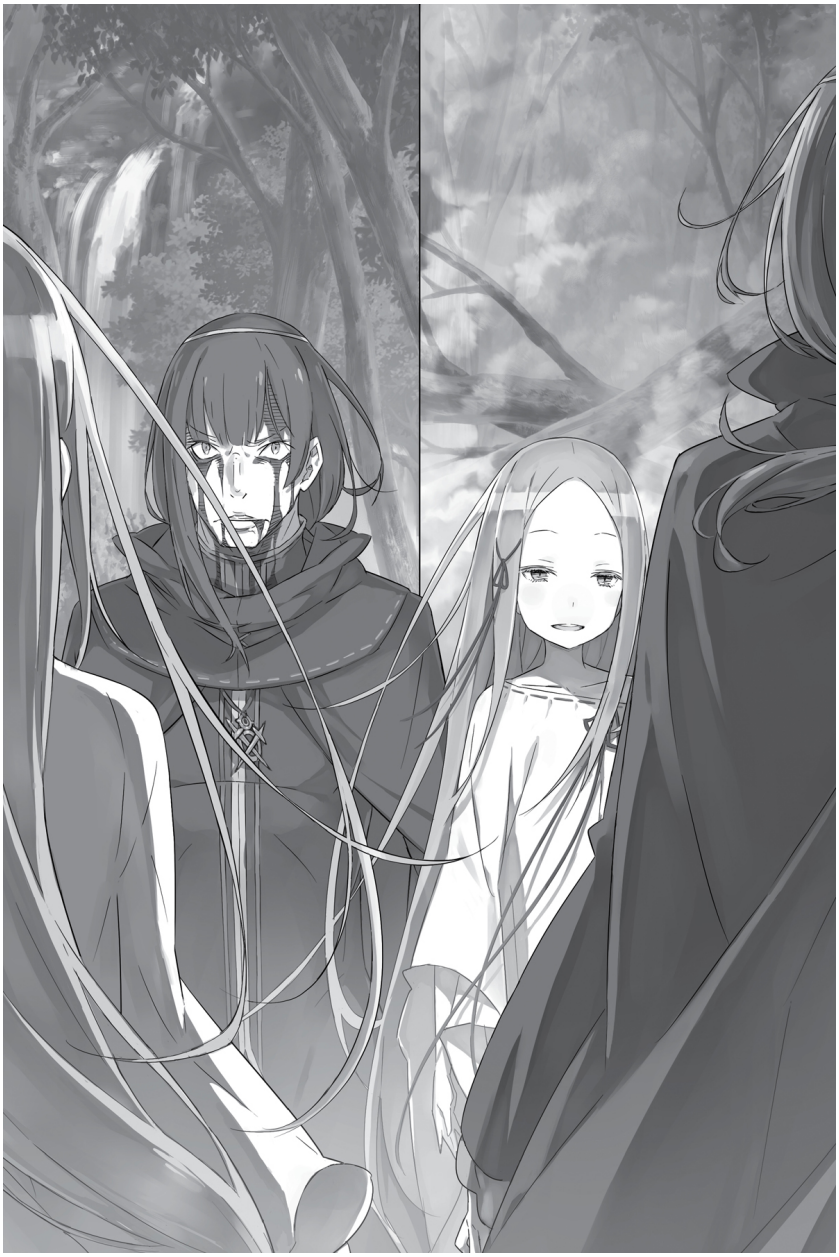
Geuse—no, this man's name was Petelgeuse Romanée-Conti.

"You will not go after them. You…shall…not…pass!!"

2

Crying tears of blood and having let a black *something* take up residence inside him, Geuse howled.

That ghastly sight combined with the solemn determination beyond anything she'd imagined sent a chill running up Emilia's spine.



Though Geuse had absorbed that *something* mere moments before, he had by no means tamed it. He'd merely allowed it to violate his being from the inside rather than the outside.

"Geuse…what—? What have you done? What did you…?"

What had he taken inside him? What was the power he had used to bury Regulus with a single blow? It was as if something had happened that she could not see, and yet, Emilia had a feeling of déjà vu nonetheless.

—Somehow, it resembled the blow with which Subaru had settled his duel with Garfiel.

"You have splendidly proven your resolve, Archbishop Petelgeuse Romanée-Conti."

However, Emilia's thoughts were interrupted by a bell-like voice.

Watching Geuse as he panted and literally coughed up blood, Pandora remained aloof as she voiced her praise. She hadn't even batted an eye at the death of Regulus, who'd stood right at her side; her natural beauty had not been blemished in the slightest.

"You, without qualified flesh, have done well to accept the Witch Factor into you. In the name of the Witch of Vanity, I hereby honor your resolve and resolute will by granting thee the seat of Sloth."

"Did you think I desiiired such a seat? This moment, I desire but a single thing without a shred of doubt…tranquility for that mother and daughter—!!"

Thinking of Fortuna and Emilia, who had departed from the battlefield, Geuse poured the blood of his heart and his very life into his resolve to give the pair a chance to escape, thrusting both his arms toward Pandora.

"Love. Such a marvelous thing…"

"It contains warmth that your falsehoods will never attain!"

When Pandora murmured with an expression of ecstasy, Geuse yelled as he turned his thoughts toward offense. The next moment, Emilia could sense an abnormal pressure materializing from thin air, but she could not see anything.

Nothing had happened. Nothing could have happened. And yet—

"The forest is being torn away…?!"

A wave of destruction spread, almost as if giant, transparent serpents were writhing all around Petelgeuse.

Trees were mowed down, the earth was split, and clumps of dirt, flowers, and grass were scattered all about. In accordance with Geuse's will, this gradually transformed from indiscriminate destruction into destruction of a more targeted kind. The forest's collapse, as if some giant were trampling upon it, thrust forward in a straight line toward Pandora, who was standing still.

Accordingly, the destruction would proceed to transform Pandora's little body into a cloud of blood—

"Now, just a minute."

"—!!"

"I came here. I am here. What is with this line of thinking, advancing the conversation while ignoring me? I think it's time even someone as generous and unselfish as me should get a little… angry."

Just before the invisible blow was to reach Pandora, a white figure intercepted the strike.

The next moment, there was an explosion. The air rebounded, and the aftershock seemed to reshape the forest's very topography.

In spite of this, the young man bearing the brunt of that might from the front—the supposedly dead Regulus—made no move to retreat. His body displayed no wounds from events prior or even a single blemish.

"You're kidding…"

Emilia could force herself to accept the fact that he had shrugged off Fortuna's initial blow without a scratch. If the gap in strength between two fighters was far enough apart, perhaps fending off ferocious, lethal attacks was indeed possible.

But Geuse's invisible attack was another matter entirely. Emilia had most certainly seen Regulus being slammed into the ground, unable to do a thing about it— Why wasn't he wounded? He wasn't even dirty.

Regulus had some kind of trick that kept attacks—no, something preventing everyone from affecting him at all.

"Regulus Corneas…!!"

"How unpleasant. You, the one who refuses to acknowledge the Witch Factor, ignored its cost and forced it into yourself, yes? Is this not showing contempt for we who rightly hold our seats? Does this not wound my tiny yet unshakable self-esteem?"

“You may say it is futile, but I—!”

As Regulus spoke provocatively, his head violently snapped back from some invisible blow. But when Regulus returned his twisted neck to its previous position, once again his face showed no trace of the strike. The vile man merely grimaced in open displeasure, standing defenseless as he continued to be showered by Geuse’s attacks.

Standing still and unguarded, he made no attempt to defend himself, yet even as his entire body sustained blow after blow, Regulus did not fall. The power Geuse had wagered some undefined thing to obtain was ineffective, yet he showed no sign of being daunted, either.

Even if Geuse could not advance, he could slow his opponent down. He continued launching his attacks so as to pin Regulus in place.

“—This is going nowhere. During this time of stalemate, there seem to be developments where ‘you’ have gone.”

The battle consisted of Geuse’s valiant onslaught and Regulus’s ruthless rebuff—as Emilia observed the fighting, Echidna spoke to her from behind.

Her emotionless statement made Emilia raise her refined eyebrows and grit her teeth.

“Are you telling me to leave this place? Even though Geuse is fighting with everything he’s got?!”

“There is room for me to argue that the strength of one’s feelings bears no effect upon the results, but unfortunately, I have no intention of debating that with you. I have little interest in bullying the weak, and I find your voice extremely unpleasant.”

“Then why don’t you just shut up and watch?! I…!”

—She wanted to remain in that place and watch over Geuse.

“—!”

When she tried to speak those words, Emilia froze, stopped by none other than her own heart.

Instantly reaching her hand up, she touched the cracked crystal at her neck. The sensation reminded Emilia of her objective. Emilia had come to challenge the Trial and to come to terms with her regrets about the past.

Perhaps this moment was her one and only chance to watch Geuse’s battle until its conclusion. But she would be betraying both Subaru, who had seen her off at the tomb’s entrance, and Geuse,

who was sacrificing everything to let young Emilia and Fortuna escape.

There was a past beyond Geuse's valiant struggle, a true past that Emilia had forgotten.

"—Surely, even your deficient mind can understand which course is wiser."

"…I think you were right after all. Let's go after Mom and me. Geuse is…"

"This is a battle between two Archbishops of the Seven Deadly Sins. The scales shall not be so easily tipped. That said, if the remaining person became involved, that would be a different story…but it is inconceivable that she would join in."

Emilia had lingering regrets as Geuse's one-sided offensive against Regulus increased in ferocity before her eyes. His tears of blood continued, and blood also flowed out from Geuse's nostrils and the corner of his mouth. The more that *something* infringed on the inside of his body, the more the force and the accuracy of the invisible destruction rose by leaps and bounds.

But in contrast, Regulus's inexplicable defensive might was unwavering. It was a total stalemate.

"Haaa…"

Then just as Echidna had pointed out, she noticed how enraptured Pandora was while watching the fighting continue; she did not show even a smidgeon of intent to join in the battle. The abnormality of the scene made Emilia feel a shudder.

"Echidna?"

"—. Let us switch locations and go after you and your mother. They were fleeing into the forest, yes?"

For a moment, something else seemed to have captured Echidna's attention. However, it was truly momentary. When addressed, her consciousness switched back, and Echidna snapped her fingers right before Emilia's eyes. The next instant, Emilia's vision swam, and the scene shifted.

Then, as they were split off from the battlefield of such fierce combat, the first thing that reached Emilia was—

"No! Mom, no! Please don't leave me!!"

Hearing the high-pitched, tearful voice of a child, Emilia reflexively turned around.

Right before her, Emilia saw a familiar, great tree—and in front of the door that led to the Princess Room, Fortuna was trying to get

the sobbing young Emilia to listen to her.

"I'm begging you, do as I say, Emilia. It's all right; very soon… yes, very soon, everything will be over, and I'll come back for you. So please, just for a little while, stay here and hide."

"No! Absolutely not! Mom, you have the same face as Geuse! Why do you look like you're not coming back?! Wh-what are you going to…leave me here for…?!?"

Using the entirety of her tiny being, Emilia desperately clung to her mother so she wouldn't slip away.

Considering that she was a young child, shrugging her off should have been a simple thing. Even so, Fortuna could not bring herself to be callous to her own daughter. The reason why was right there, filling the woman's eyes.

Fortuna was Emilia's mother. That was why she could not simply cast aside her tearful daughter's hand.

"Don't leave me! Let me go with you! I won't lie anymore! I won't break any more promises!! I'll be a good girl! I'll be a good girl, so…please don't leave me…!"

"Emilia… Emilia, Emilia, Emilia…!"

Wanting to stay with her mother no matter what it took, Emilia offered up everything she could think of. Her voice made Fortuna spontaneously hold her daughter tight. Had she not done so, Emilia would have seen the state her face was in.

—Her daughter would have seen her mother sobbing a flood of tears.

"Mom…"

And so with clear eyes, the Emilia of the present beheld the scene that young Emilia could not.

To Emilia, Fortuna was eternally admirable, imposing, strong… Her mother was someone she revered, and she'd believed without a doubt that there was not a single weak bone in her body. She'd never imagined seeing Fortuna this hurt, this stricken by nigh unendurable grief as hot tears flowed freely.

Through the prism of the past, her mother's crying tore open Emilia's heart. Though she instantly brought both her hands to her face, she could not stop her own tears.

Seeing that scene, witnessing her mother's face from the present, Emilia keenly understood.

She had never doubted it, but in that moment, she gained renewed conviction.

“Mom…you’re my real mother…”

It didn’t matter any longer who’d actually given birth to her.

No matter how much Fortuna had claimed to be nothing but a stand-in for her mother and however much she asked Emilia to not forget her real mother, this would never change.

Even though she treasured and respected Fortuna so much, those words alone, she could never accept.

“Mom…I love you…!”

“—Lady Fortuna! And Emilia, too!”

Fortuna was still unable to peel Emilia off her when a voice called to her from behind.

The voice made Fortuna vigorously wipe her tears away and rise to see who was there. It was Archi, the young man with swaying triple braids. Nervousness rested in his green eyes, but the sight of Fortuna and Emilia together made him say, “I’m so glad,” visibly relieved.

“Archi! The forest… Is everyone in the settlement safe?!”

“—. No, I am sad to say. Those who came with Lord Archbishop are engaged in combat with a group of men!”

No doubt Archi noticed the traces of Fortuna’s tears, but he did not press the issue, prioritizing his report. Hearing the details made Fortuna lower her eyes, which conveyed her worries to Emilia as well. In an attempt to comfort the young girl, Archi reassured her.

“Emilia, there is no need to be so afraid. It’s all right. Believe in me and everyone in the settlement. Plus your mother is a very strong and scary person.”

“O-okay…”

“Archi, *scary* is excessive. Goodness…”

As Archi smiled at Emilia, his words made Fortuna indignantly cross her arms. Having regained a portion of her usual composure, Fortuna exhaled sharply at Archi’s show of consideration.

“I suppose that even if I return Emilia to her room, it won’t keep her hidden for long…”

“It pains me to say it, but if she is in this forest, they will eventually find her. Their objective…”

“—Is the seal, I imagine. I don’t know how they heard of it, but even that woman came crawling out…”

Fortuna’s anger toward the assailants—in particular, Pandora—was incredible. Something must have happened between them to cause Fortuna to lose her calm like that.

Even if that was not the case, combat was breaking out in every corner of the forest. Emilia's homeland had already been turned into a battlefield.

"Fine. At any rate, I'm heading out. I have the greatest fighting ability of anyone in the forest, so this is not the time to dawdle in a place like this."

"No! We will fight! Lady Fortuna, please take Emilia out of the forest!"

"If we run from here, what then? All that will accomplish is allowing this peaceful land to be stolen. If we lose, it means the seal will fall into their hands. This time, the world *will* be destroyed!"

When Archi tried to get her to reconsider, Fortuna silenced him with an even stronger tone of voice. After that, seemingly embarrassed by her angry retort, he added, "I am sorry."

"You resent me, don't you? You should never have been caught up in all this. All because you took Emilia and me in… This is a hardship you never needed."

"—!! No one— There isn't a single person among us who thinks that way!!"

"Archi…"

Archi met Fortuna's regretful voice with a fierce retort, as if that was the only thing he could not allow her to say. Archi was indignant, his face red up to the tips of his long, pointy ears, a trait distinctive of the elves.

"Please stop treating us like strangers! It's true that compared to our long life spans, the time we spent here may seem as brief as the blink of an eye! But—but even so, have you forgotten the time we have spent together in this forest?!"

"

regretted it many times, I forget again soon after. That's why…"

Shaking her head to the kneeling Archi, Fortuna slowly went down on one knee before Emilia.

"Emilia, listen carefully. Mom has a duty to protect everyone. It's very important. That's why I'll be away, just for a tiny bit."

"N…no, Mom. I—I…!"

"Please. Do as I say, just for a little while. I want you to go with Archi and head outside the forest. This forest…is *really* dangerous, so please."

Fortuna spoke to Emilia, who shook her head with teary eyes, then looked back to Archi. Seeing the resolve resting in those violet eyes, Archi felt his slender body stiffen.

"L-Lady Fortuna… I—!"

"Archi…it is a little soon, but I entrust the duty of Guardian to you. Please take Emilia with you out of the forest. It is a difficult world to live in, but surely, there is hope. I know there is. So…"

"Please don't speak as if this is the end! I'll stand with you and everyone until the very…"

"Take care of Emilia. For my brother, my sister-in-law, and me, she's our precious, irreplaceable daughter."

Fortuna spoke in a frail, fleeting voice, so removed from her usual strong and sublime self.

Hearing Fortuna, both as a mother and as a woman, brought Archi to tears. He sobbed, covering his face with both hands.

"That's low…! You know that if you say it that way, there's no way I can refuse… I—I want to fight with everyone, too…! Yet…!"

"I'm sorry, forcing so many burdens onto you children like this. Forgive us for being so unfair."

Placing a hand on the crying young man's shoulder, Fortuna painfully asked for his forgiveness. Archi said nothing, but his unceasing tears were proof that he had already accepted her request.

"Emilia."

"No!! Mom, I wanna be with you! Please! Pretty please! I'm asking nicely! Please let me be with you!! I don't want… I don't want to be alone!!"

"You're not alone at all. Listen to me."

Weeping and wailing, Emilia covered her ears, trying to block out her mother's parting words. Seeing this made the Emilia of the present want to go and pinch her younger self on the cheeks.

It was not that she wanted to scold her unwillingness to listen. It was because she wanted to convey that all the words Fortuna was saying, every word and every phrase, were things the girl absolutely had to remember.

"Emilia."

Fortuna bent down low, gently embracing Emilia and pulling her close.

She grabbed Emilia's arms, though the girl was desperately trying to cover her own ears, and nestled her head in her daughter's silver hair. Then she brought their faces close, rubbing cheek to cheek with a gentle touch, as if she was taking care to not damage a thing more precious than anything else in all of existence.

"Mom is always by your side. When you close your eyes, I'll be there, inside your memories. When you hug yourself, I'll be the warmth inside your chest. When you call, I will be the echo under the sky. Mom is with you. Always, always, forever and ever, together."

"Liar. Liar. Liar. Liar… Mom, you liar…!"

"Emilia—I promise."

Emilia refused all her mother's reassurances, but that last word made her breath catch.

Her smiling mother offered a palm right in front of her, seemingly drawing in Emilia's palm until they finally touched.

"Mom and Emilia will always be together. I promise you."

"W-we'll really…be together…?"

"Yes, really. Emilia… Lia, Mom *really* loves you, more than anyone in this world."

The gentle voice with which she called her *Lia* made Emilia, and Emilia's emotions, fall apart.

Sobs spilled out, and the two Emilias, past and present, collapsed into tears on the spot.

"Mom… I—I love you, too… I love… I love…!!"

"I love you. I love you, Mom. I really *love you so much…"*

Present and past, the two Emilias' emotions overlapped, desperately trying to return those feelings of love.

They strained their voices as much as their bodies would let them, as if they knew that if they failed to pour it all out now, if they didn't share with their mother everything they felt, they would never have another chance.

"—Lia, I love you."

Fortuna gently touched her hot lips to her daughter's cheek, eyelid, and brow.

They touched. They embraced. At that late stage, Fortuna did so to display her motherly love—this was the only moment Fortuna allowed herself to be Emilia's mother.

"…Archi, please."

"—Yes. I understand."

Having expressed her undying love to her beloved daughter with all her being, Fortuna stood up and addressed Archi.

The tearful young man accepted Emilia from Fortuna, firmly holding that tiny body in his arms as he deeply bowed his head.

"You will probably get away safely…"

"Yes……I understand! Emilia…this girl will absolutely not be harmed by anyone!"

As Archi shouted it like a vow, Fortuna relaxed, her relief visible on her face.

After that, she pointed in the direction that led outside the forest.

"Please. Go."

Archi, who no longer had words left to speak, broke into a run in the direction Fortuna pointed.

Held tight by the young man racing through the woods, Emilia looked back over his shoulder one last time— She looked at her receding mother, raising an incoherent voice.

That voice made the sharp look in Fortuna's eyes truly soften gently.

"—I love you, Emilia."

3

Held by Archi, Emilia desperately gazed in the direction of her mother, who was no longer in view.

Perhaps if she kept staring over there, the sight of her unseen mother might pop out somewhere without warning. Perhaps her mother was chasing after her. Those were the hopes she clung to.

"Emilia…!"

The little girl's earnest hopes reached even Archi as he clutched her tiny body. What could anyone say to a little girl who'd been separated from her beloved mother? No one had a good answer to that.

“Why…why…?! Why did it end up like…this…? I-is it because I broke my promise…because I left the room…?”

“No. You’re wrong, Emilia. Emilia, it’s not your fault! It’s not Lady Fortuna’s fault; it’s not anyone’s fault! There’s no reason for you to blame yourself!”

“Then why…? Why are they leaving me…? Mom, Geuse… Is—is it because they hate me…because I did all kinds of bad things…?”

The all-too-sudden separation had pushed young Emilia’s heart right up to the breaking point.

She looked back on her own actions, trying to find some way she was responsible, the reason why everything had gone so badly.

She’d broken her promises. She’d left a room she wasn’t supposed to leave any number of times. She’d gone to a place deep in the forest she was forbidden from going, discovered a seal she wasn’t supposed to know— She couldn’t help but think all these things put together had brought this about.

“Would it be better if I’d been alone…alone locked in that room the whole time? If I’d done that, could I have been with everyone… not losing anyone…?”

“Emilia…!”

“Was I a bad girl…? Is that why everyone hates me…why I’ll be alone?”

“You’re wrong… You’re wrong, Emilia. No one— No one hates you at all. This world doesn’t exist to make you suffer. This world, and everyone in it, is here to make you happy…!”

The girl’s tears kept falling as Archi desperately tried to get through to her. Part of it was because he wanted Emilia to stop crying. More than that, it was also what he so dearly wanted to believe in.

It wasn’t just Fortuna or Geuse. Everyone related to Emilia in the past loved her, protected her, and would do anything to help her.

“You, youngster there—!”

As Archi sprinted through the forest, there was a sharp voice as someone leaped out onto the path.

Archi immediately shot a wary look toward the individual in a black habit who had slipped through a gap in the trees. But the other party greeted him by lifting both hands up.

“Wait! I am one of Lord Archbishop Romanée-Conti’s ‘fingers’!”

“The Lord Archbishop’s…”

“Yes, be at ease. You are safe he… Wait, could that be…?!”

The man in the habit identified himself, bringing Archi some measure of relief. It wasn’t long before the man noticed him carrying Emilia in his arms and reacted with shock. Archi solemnly nodded at him.

“Lady Fortuna entrusted her to me. She is assisting the others in battle. It shouldn’t be long before she sweeps the forest clean of enemies …”

“…It pains me to say this, but that will be somewhat difficult.”

The man made a bitter face, which caused Archi to go, “Eh?”

“We have confirmed the presence of one of the Archbishops of the Seven Deadly Sins: Greed, head of the radical faction. The Lord Archbishop has engaged him in combat, but the situation cannot be resolved by simply driving him off.”

“An Archbishop of the Seven Deadly Sins…but what problem is there beyond him?”

“The demon beast Black Serpent has been released into the forest.”

“Th-the Black Serpent—?!”

The man’s words rocked Archi. He gazed back toward the forest with a look of disbelief.

“That’s crazy—it’s not possible! The Black Serpent is a pure calamity, even more than the White Whale and the Great Rabbit—a natural disaster that obeys no one. The timing of its arrival, right as this attack is going on—that’s…”

“A being…a Witch, who can make that possible, has come to this forest.”

“Witch? Witch, you say? That’s even crazier talk! The witches besides the Witch of Jealousy are long destroyed, and the Witch of Jealousy should herself be sealed in the sands of a far-off…”

“There was a hidden Witch— Her name is Pandora. She is a part of the Witch Cult, the world’s forbidden Witch.”

The man spoke as if he were wringing out every word, leaving Archi agape, like a bucket of water had roused him from his sleep.

An Archbishop of the Seven Deadly Sins, and even a Witch he had never heard of before, had arrived—and what kept Archi’s heart from crumbling into despair was the small heartbeat he could feel through his own chest.

He’d been entrusted with something. Archi could not back away

from it.

"…Lady Fortuna entrusted me with Emilia so that she might escape. Whatever happens to our homeland, I must at least protect this girl…protect our hope!"

"…I shall accompany you. Old as I might be, I am still part of the Romanée-Conti family."

The man was roused by Archi's words and he bowed deeply to the young elf who literally nestled his bundle of hope against his breast.

With a flutter of his habit sleeve, the aged man leaned forward and impressively kicked off the ground. Then he trained his eyes toward the path leading out of the forest, intending to guide them—

"—No!"

The instant they broke into a run, the man suddenly shouted, and the urgency in his voice made Archi immediately stop. As Archi opened his eyes wide, wondering what was going on, the man stood, both arms spread wide.

"What a blunder… To think it would come so quickly…"

"What has…? Wha, huh?!"

The man murmured in anguish, bewildering Archi—a moment later, the man's arms fell from their shoulders. Like a doll with bad stitching, his outstretched limbs detached completely, just like that.

No blood spewed from the fallen arms or from where they had been severed. In fact, the arms were shriveled in an unnatural way that had nothing to do with age, rotting like tree roots starved of water.

"The Black Serpent's vicious tongue…! Please flee!"

"But!"

"It is too late for me…"

Forcefully shouting for Archi to run, the man looked back, his face rapidly losing all color. Red and black spots came over his neck, which poked out of his habit, and his face was collapsing to the point where it seemed his eyeballs might fall out.

"Bu, bubu…aaa, bu…!"

Moaning in anguish, the armless man collapsed onto the ground, his upper torso writhing. Black blood gushed out of his eye sockets, nostrils, earlobes, and more places, until finally, he stopped moving at all.

The man's final moments left Archi, let alone young Emilia, in a panic.

“The crucible of disease…the plague-bearing demon beast the Black Serpent…!!”

In a raspy voice, Archi covered young Emilia’s eyes as he invoked the name of the enemy that had slain their companion.

Of course, it did not react to his voice. However, in the gaps between Archi’s and Emilia’s ragged breathing, a distinct sound echoed, like a gigantic creature licking its lips.

It felt like a hunter, waiting for its prey’s fear to heighten before it—

“—Sh-shit!!”

Realizing the approaching danger, Archi yelled a curse and fled. He did not know which way to run. This was the enemy’s hunting ground. They’d been herded into it unawares.

He’d put as much distance as he could between him and the man’s corpse. If possible, he’d leave the forest entirely. Focusing only on the rigid presence of Emilia pressing against his chest, Archi desperately fled from the menace.

Flee, flee, the young elf continued to flee, resisting with all his might—

“Ah—”

While getting ready to launch himself forward, he felt a scalding heat run up his right ankle. The instant he realized he’d been licked, his willpower crumbled.

The wicked tongue was slithering up his bare flesh. The illness it caused spread across his skin, manifesting as reddish-black burn scars.

The instant he saw what was taking place, Archi turned a palm toward his own right leg.

“…Fulla!”

Without hesitation, he used a blade of wind to send his diseased right leg flying off from the knee.

Needing support to remain upright, he angled his falling body against a tree. Archi, breaking out in a thick sweat at the excruciating pain of losing his leg, gritted his teeth, enduring the sensation of his brain catching on fire as he continued to chant.

“Hyuma…!”

With the sound of air cracking, he froze the stump of his own severed leg. White steam rose from his wound, and Archi raised up a renewed scream over his extremely crude method of stopping the bleeding.

It had been a bold, drastic decision. The speed and the means he employed proved the depth of his resolve and his skill—and then there was the fact that he had not let go of Emilia once during that entire process.

"Archi…?"

With her face firmly pressed against his arm, Emilia could not see what had happened. Archi forced a smile onto his face, sitting up as he downplayed the greatest agony he had ever experienced.

"It's nothing… It's all right… It's all right, so…!"

His words fragmented, Archi lied to Emilia that nothing had happened. His actions were worthy of respect—and yet, cruel fate would greet his determination, no matter how incredible, with scorn.

The remaining part of his frozen right leg was losing color above the knee, desiccated like a baked stone. It was as if the very earth was drying up. The remainder of Archi's right leg had begun dying; the disease would not stop there.

"…Emilia. Um, you see the white flowers on the other side of those two trees?"

"…Y-yeah."

Released by Archi, who sat with his back against a large tree, Emilia put both her feet on the ground and looked in the direction he pointed. Gazing at the pair of trees and the white flowers beyond, she nodded.

"Can you run in the direction of the flowers? Past the flowers… straight ahead…"

"R-run… I can run. But…"

"Then run…"

Staring at the white flowers, young Emilia caught her breath as Archi spoke those words to her.

They were brief words with which to send her off. Even as hesitance hovered in her eyes, it dawned on her that Archi's state was nothing like normal as she looked between him and the flowers over and over.

If she ran, she would be alone. Once again, someone would disappear from her life.

"It's all right, Emilia. You won't…be alone…"

"Archi…"

"Now, run. No matter what you hear, don't turn back… Run!"

Archi's sharp voice made Emilia jump. She took one step

forward, then broke into a run. She forced herself to not look back because Archi said not to.

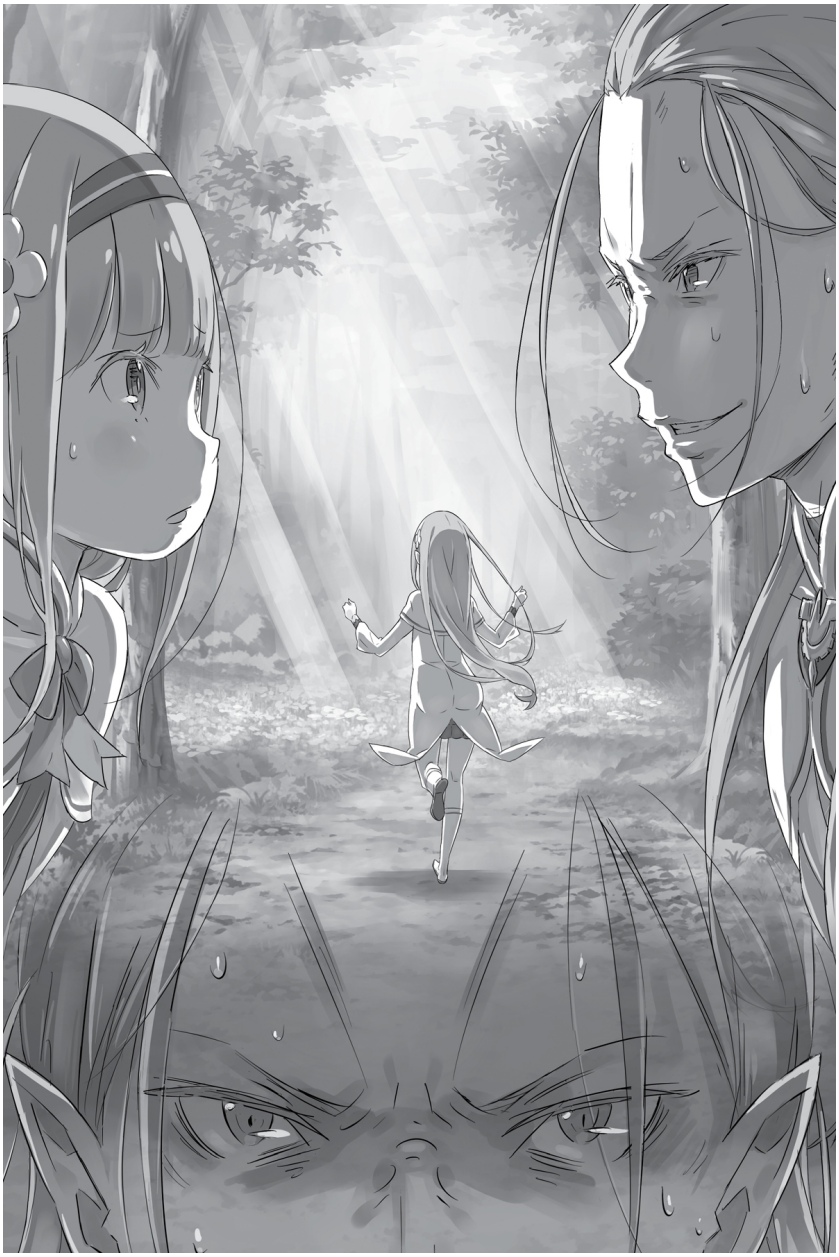
Archi's voice, Fortuna's voice, Geuse's voice—all reverberated in the little girl's mind.

—She wanted to believe that if she did as she was told, everything would go back to how it used to be.

"That's right. There you go. Run, run…just like how you always ran around and gave us so much trouble…"

Archi spoke those words through a thin smile, staring at the back of the girl who was already hard to see in the distance as he stripped off the sleeves of his tunic.

The shriveling corruption had already reached his lower chest. He no longer felt like he could move either leg. His flesh had lost its color, its texture becoming like stone, thoroughly reminiscent of some kind of repulsive demon beast.



He heard a sound. *Sss, sss.* It was the sound of a demon beast licking its lips after spotting its prey right before it.

It came as if to steal away the escaping girl, the forest's hope, and to rob all meaning from the tiny, remaining flicker of Archi's ending life.

"As if…anyone would let you pass…"

Eyes burning with the will to fight on, Archi ignored his immobile legs, using the strength of his arms alone to sit himself up. The ominous sound stopped…as if the beast was taking renewed interest, captivated by the prey it had presumed stricken down.

It was because he sensed his own impending death that he'd sent the girl as far as possible away from her own.

"Lady Fortuna…that girl…will probably be all right."

Sss, sss, was the sound that heralded the approach of the end.

Hearing this sound, knowing that it represented nothing less than the greatest peril to his life, Archi proudly smiled.

"

that unnatural power as he stood. The Authority one perhaps ought to call invisible arms had given Geuse the means to defy an Archbishop of the Seven Deadly Sins—

"—You know, it really is time for you to acknowledge this is useless."

Even having obtained power at such great cost, his target Regulus was completely unharmed and even scornfully laughing at him.

Standing amid a hovering cloud of dust and unnatural destruction, Regulus seemed bored. The sight of him unaffected by any of it was so warped that it was as if someone had put a sticker onto a finished painting.

"Even after doing…this much…!"

"It's time to face up and realize it already, yeah? We're different. You and I are actors meant for different stages. It's not an issue of whether you can beat me. No one can beat me. No one can hurt me. Sword Saint or dragon, it's all useless. All of it, every last bit…useless."

Speaking bluntly to Geuse, who was coughing up blood, Regulus nonchalantly waved an arm. The gesture, as if shooing a fly, instantly put Geuse on guard, offering his flesh to the black power wriggling inside him. He prepared to deal with it, come what may—then his right arm was sent flying.

"Wha…?!"

"I'm bored stiff of seeing that reaction, too. I went through the trouble of giving you time to spend with your wife and all. I wanted at least some kind of reward for that, but it looks like I got my hopes up for nothing."

"Ngh…what are…? Guh, agh! Whoaaa!!"

Pressing down on the remains of his severed arm, Geuse tumbled spectacularly. Upon closer inspection, he had also been wounded in both his legs, where ugly gouges marred his thighs as if beasts had hungrily torn the flesh off them.

He endured the pain, blood frothing at his lips all the while. The pitiful sight made Regulus grimace.

"In the end, see, this is all your resolve and determination and all that stuff amounts to. But don't mind that too much. It's not you; it's everyone. No one can hold more than their own two hands can carry. You have to live within your means. That's normal. You understand, right?"

“Gah, aah, aah…”

“Really, I hate all this. Maybe you think I like hurting other people out of some kind of sadistic hobby, but you would be mistaken, and I would take great insult at that mischaracterization. I’m not doing this because I particularly want to. It only seems like I’m bullying you because you’re weak. I don’t have any desire to do things like this any longer. For good or ill, I, a satisfied man, do not want to interfere with anyone else. I am content, without want. You need to accept that.”

The force of the bleeding had weakened, and Geuse’s voice had grown too meager for yelling. His raspy, ragged breaths and the spasms of his body invited pity, like an insect on the verge of expiring.

With Geuse thus on the brink of death, Regulus looked down at him, speaking without malice or enmity or anything else. He felt there was no need for personal emotions to come into play when he was merely listing off facts.

To Regulus Corneas, Geuse’s desperate actions were the same as a breeze—no, such a gentle wind would have at least rustled his forelocks. Accordingly, his actions did not even amount to that.

As she stood in the destroyed forest, Pandora showed no more sign of change than Regulus did. The very embodiment of beauty, her lovely visage, let alone the white cloth that enveloped her small, slender torso, remained utterly unaffected.

“Among the masses, not everyone can think like you, and certainly not everyone will reach the same lofty realm. You are more special than others. You should be content that you are so. Your completed form is marvelous. And they, the incomplete, are marvelous in their own way.”

“I do not seek your praise, nor do I endorse your opinion that they are marvelous or anything of the sort. At any rate, neither I nor the Black Serpent needed to show up, Lady Pandora. You could have handled this much all by yourself.”

Showing no sign of joy over her words of praise, Regulus indicated the forest with both hands as he spoke to Pandora. She gracefully acknowledged his words with a nod.

“Yes, that might well be the case. However, I needed to see with my own eyes just how earnestly people strive for their revered goals and just how lovely they can be while doing so.”

“The gist is, you wanted to see the desperate faces of people

backed into a corner, didn't you? Ha-ha-ha, if that's all, you should just put it simply so people can understand. Making a needless excuse feels like it only wastes my time."

"I find that way of taking it to be quite adorable."

As a smile that could charm the heart came over Pandora, Regulus replied with a wicked smile of his own. From there, he turned his eyes toward the collapsed Geuse, walking over to inflict the final blow.

"Well, even if this body dies, it's not like you don't have spares. Dragging what's inside you and keeping a grip on the scruff of your neck will make dealing with you easier. For someone who made me use up all this time, you really are a talentless hack."

As he spoke, Regulus lifted his foot over Geuse's head. It was clear he would squash Geuse's head like an overripe melon— Just before that, a voice interrupted.

"Al Hyuma!!"

In accordance with the chant, the world accepted the transformation of mana; with a cracking sound, it became destruction made manifest. The sound of the atmosphere crackling made Regulus lift his head, scowling in disgust.

"If it's not one thing, then it's another…!"

Regulus clicked his tongue— The next moment, a mighty spear of ice sufficient to blot out the sky slammed into his face, and the resulting quake, having nowhere else to go, became a ferocious shock wave that enveloped Regulus, completely crushing his slender frame.

There were blasts of wind and tremors of the earth, repeating so much as to completely lose count. Fragments of shattered ice scattered all across the ground, changing the scenery to the point that one would doubt it was ever a forest to begin with.

Light reflected off the glimmering ice, and in that chaotic, luminous world—a silver-haired woman stood at the fallen man's side.

"Geuse! Geuse, hold on! What did they…? Ahhh, what should I do…?!"

"Lady Fortuna, is that you…?"

Responding to that voice, light returned to Geuse's eyes, though he was barely breathing. It was unmistakable that his life was in peril even so, but as Geuse barely kept his consciousness tethered, Fortuna nodded to him several times.

“Yes, yes, that’s right, it’s me. Geuse, to see you like this…”

“It iiiis fine… A body of flesh must someday perish… The finger who entruuusted this body to me surely understood as much… More importantly, is Lady Emilia…?”

“I left her to Archi…the next Guardian, so she could have a chance to escape outside. I’m sure they’re all right, thanks to you.”

“Iiis that so…? That iiis very…good.”

“—It’s not remotely good whatsoever!!”

As Geuse relaxed his blood-ridden face in relief, his words made Regulus cry out with an angry voice.

Blasting apart the ice-covered soil, Regulus brushed away white mist with both arms, his expression indignant. He plucked at his head, enmity resting in his eyes like nothing before.

“Who do you think you are, coming back and pulling that out of the blue? I was about to stomp and crush his head just now! With what right, with whose permission, do you dare! Interfere! With me…me me me me me me me me me ME?!!”

In a fit of rage, Regulus squatted and plunged both his arms into the ground. He proceeded to swing them upward, tossing soft soil toward Fortuna and Geuse.

His demeanor was truly like that of a child, throwing a tantrum and scattering earth about—

“No! That debris… You must evade all of it…!”

“Eh?”

Fortuna was ignoring the shower of dirt and trying to refine her mana for a counterattack when Geuse pushed her down. The action he chose over counterattack, over defense, was to push her straight to the ground without even breaking her fall— Fortuna raised her voice, questioning Geuse’s decision…and then she saw.

The sand and pebbles Regulus threw had opened “countless holes” in the surface of the ground.

These were literally countless holes. Almost like the marks raindrops left upon parched soil, the dirt Regulus had thrown gouged the ground with such penetrating power that she could not see where they bottomed out.

The might of the attack was obvious from one glance at the fallen trees caught in its area of effect. They had been turned into wood chips from the countless, tiny holes punched into them; a human body subjected to the same would have surely turned to bloody mist.

It was nigh unbelievable destructive power, and most frightening of all was—

“Hey now! What did you go dodging it for?! Just soak it up and turn into mincemeat! That goes for the talentless hack Petelgeuse and that woman over there, too! I would’ve been fine adding you as my seventy-ninth wife, so what’s with this stupid behavior, huh? Huh?!”

Whining loudly, Regulus thrust his arms into the ground’s surface once more— He could do this consecutively.

He was a being who could not be harmed by some of the deadliest spells in existence yet could kill by scattering some dirt and pebbles. In spite of this, his mental state was as immature as an infant’s, destructively egotistical beyond anyone’s reach.

This dangerous being, like a badly raised child who was liable to bite anyone depending on his mood, had been granted power on par with a dragon—that was how Fortuna appraised the vile man before her.

“If you don’t like me taking one limb off, I’ll take all four! I’ll make you regret making a fool out of me…out of Greed!!”

“—Please wait, Archbishop Corneas.”

“Aah?”

Just when Regulus was about to resume his attacks, the platinum-haired beauty urged him to wait.

Still squatting, Regulus looked back at Pandora. His eyes were still thickly colored with anger, and it seemed even his ally, Pandora, was in danger of winding up on the receiving end.

With that dangerous look still in his eyes, Regulus spoke to Pandora, his lips trembling.

“…What is it, Lady Pandora? Right now, I am in the middle of punishing the louts infringing upon my rights. What do you want from me? Whatever you intend, watch your words and answer me right now…!”

“Please restrain your anger, Archbishop Corneas. I will not permit you to kill him, or her, in this place. Do you not feel anything when you gaze upon them?”

“

over to rage, stopped moving. Then he looked at Fortuna and Geuse, finally turning back to Pandora.

"Did you just…order me to restrain my anger?"

His tone was quiet, sounding emotionless to the ear. However, that calm crumbled a moment later.

"—You've got some nerve butting in where you're not wanted, woman!!!"

In that situation, where everyone was trying to have their own way, Regulus's short temper hit its limit and exploded in the worst way possible.

Though they had been both on the same side, though he had paid respect to his superior, Regulus hurled sand toward Pandora without hesitation, seemingly having forgotten their relationship entirely.

The might of the earthen shrapnel was immense. The dirt he scattered ravaged any part of the forest that was in its line of fire with overwhelming force, bearing down upon the beautiful girl—and this girl, a goddess of beauty, a living masterpiece, was cruelly transformed into a cloud of blood.

"—You're kidding me."

Defenseless and showered by the soil, Pandora was flayed apart, leaving Fortuna agape. It was a natural reaction. Her reviled opponent had died a dog's death at the hands of a former comrade.

Her supernatural nature was rendered meaningless, the girl's dead flesh fated to be eaten amid a ravaged forest.

"This is what happens when someone gives me lip. Why can't people just treat me with the consideration anyone else is due? Don't get in my way. Don't interrupt when I'm talking. Don't object to what I do. Is that so hard to ask? Hey, you two over there…what do you think?"

Having murdered Pandora, though the madness residing in his eyes remained unexhausted, Regulus turned back toward the other two.

There was no room to appreciate that the number of their enemies had been reduced by one. Even if they no longer faced two mighty foes, they could not overcome their predicament without some means of dealing with their seemingly impervious enemy.

Twice, Regulus had endured Fortuna's surprise attacks unharmed. She hated to admit it, but she could not defeat him—nor could Geuse, and any further attempt to do so would put his life at

risk.

"Let us buy time so that Emilia might escape…"

"In that case… Lady Fortuna…leave this to me…"

Geuse had arrived at the same conclusion as Fortuna yet continued onward to a different choice for bringing that outcome about.

"No matter how much blood I must shed…until this flesh of mine yields, I…I will buy time…so please, Lady Fortuna, escape…"

"Don't say stupid things."

To Geuse, who lay within her arms and had resolved to be a stone to cast away, Fortuna spoke in a gentle voice, her cheeks softening.

Despite the situation, she found the fact that she could smile even so somewhat mysterious and something to be proud of.

"Are you saying to leave you here and run? If I was going to do that, I'd never have come back. I even parted ways with Emilia to return. How can you tell me to run now?"

"But…why iiis it, then, you have returned…? I am…"

"—To not let you die…and if you must die, to be at your side."

With Fortuna's violet eyes staring at him, Geuse's eyes, misty with blood, opened wide.

Fortuna held Geuse, who was lighter from the loss of one arm and so much blood, pressing him close to her as she spoke.

"What awaits me in a world without you, in a forest where you will never come? I am too weak to live long in a world that doesn't have you in it."

"You, weak…?"

"I am weak. All I did was put up a brave front for you and Emilia."

Fortuna lifted Geuse up, looking at him with a face that somehow seemed freed of all burdens. Trembling, Geuse leaned on her arm for support, the two embracing each other as they faced forward.

Gazing at the pair, Regulus clicked his tongue, disgusted from the bottom of his heart.

"Not only do you ignore my question for a prolonged period of time, but now you've gotten yourselves all worked up? Makes me wonder what in the world could you be thinking? What's the meaning of this? I've already shown you the superiority of my power, explained everything in easy-to-understand ways, so why

are you going *We can do it* over and over? What the hell are you thinking?!"

"What a tiresome and noisy man. Get a clue already. For us, there is only one answer."

"Yeeees, I suppose so…"

Fortuna and Geuse exchanged glances, their voices in tandem as they spoke to the indignant Regulus.

""—Who knows and who cares, moron?""

Their voices overlapped, and Fortuna stuck up her middle finger for good measure.

Uttering those biting words together, Fortuna and Geuse gathered their power in their taunt, making Regulus's face red with rage.

"Fine with me! I'll make both of you indistinguishable puddles of blood and use you to fertilize this filthy forest—"

"—I told you to wait, did I not, Archbishop Corneas?"

For her own convenience, Pandora impeded Regulus for the third time— Dancing softly in the sky, she pressed her slender hand down upon Regulus's head, forcing the disturbing man's body to sink without any apparent resistance from the ground. In an instant, he was buried from the tips of his toes to the crown of his head. As Pandora landed right beside him, Regulus stared up at her from directly below.

"Over and over again… What does it take to kill you…?!"

"I forgive your violent actions, your violent deeds, all these things. You have already fulfilled the purpose for which I brought you here. It is fine for you to go now."

"After calling me here, you tell me to go now that you're satisfied? Just how much do you think you can make a fool out of me…?"

"Is it that unacceptable? Then I shall take care of it. *Archbishop Corneas cannot possibly be here. He is spending time at his mansion, surrounded by his wives.*"

"Wa—"

The instant she made that one-sided argument, Regulus tried to shout something as he suddenly vanished from sight.

It wasn't that he sank deeper into the ground. His very presence had truly, suddenly disappeared. As a matter of fact, the place where he had assuredly been bore no trace of burial at all.

It was as if, when Pandora said, …*cannot possibly be here*, the

very world had affirmed her words.

"At my request, the boisterous one has departed the stage. Now we can take our time to chat, yes?"

"…Before that, may I ask one thing? You should be dead and in pieces, yes?"

Fortuna posed that question to Pandora, who was smiling gracefully and standing there like it was the most natural thing. Surely, that smile, along with that graceful body, had been turned into fragments of bloody flesh and scattered around the forest in its entirety.

And yet, the tragic state Fortuna was certain she'd witnessed was gone, and the dead had unnaturally come back to life. To Fortuna, who was unable to conceal her shock at that fact, Pandora tilted her head.

"Perhaps…you are 'mistaken' about something?"

"—!"

Pandora's words, spoken without malice, sent a deep shudder through Fortuna.

Though it should not have been so, the world had changed out of respect for Pandora's opinion. The scene Fortuna herself had seen with her own eyes had been denied, and history had been supernaturally rewritten with a scene she had no recollection of seeing.

—A corpse had been erased, and Pandora had returned to life. Regulus had vanished, along with all traces of his presence.

Moreover, the consequences did not end at Pandora being safe and sound, with the hole Regulus had been in now buried. When she first realized the effects, Fortuna nearly let out an unwitting yelp.

Opening her eyes wide, Fortuna moved her trembling fingers toward Geuse, who was assuredly on the brink of death— His torn-off arm and the grave wounds to his legs had been healed and restored.

"It is a simple matter. If Archbishop Corneas was never here, it follows that all the results of Archbishop Corneas's actions would also vanish. Although, you may consider the healing of your wounds a gesture of goodwill on my part…"

"G-Geuse, that arm…"

"There's nothing amiss. My body…is sound, aside from what resides inside it."

“I have not gone so far as to overwrite the fact that you incorporated the Witch Factor into yourself. I wish to praise your actions and the actions of the woman who returned for your sake. Please think of this as a kindness from me.”

Geuse was bewildered by Pandora’s elegant smile even as he acknowledged that his own body had been healed. Fortuna heard the words from a distance as she felt the ground crumble under her own feet.

Pandora, her hated foe, was not an opponent Fortuna could take on. Everything that had happened in the forest that day had far exceeded Fortuna’s puny imagination.

Or perhaps, at that rate, everything that had happened would simply vanish into thin—

“Lady Fortuna, please get ahold of yourself!”

“—! Geuse!”

As Fortuna wavered, Geuse used his restored right hand to pinch her cheek. Fortuna was surprised by the pain as Geuse grasped both her shoulders and continued.

“I am sure you have doubts. I am sure you are bewildered. However, these are thiiiings we must leave for another time. Right now, what is important…is that we do what we can for Lady Emilia’s sake!”

Little by little, his desperate plea restored Fortuna’s waning vigor.

Yes. It was just as Geuse had said. She was afraid, not knowing what this incomprehensible foe might do. But surely, she already knew the most frightening thing of all.

—If this woman’s objectives involved her own precious, beloved daughter…

“Whatever happened, I don’t care. Right now—!”

“Iiiit falls to the two of us to strike her down! If she iiiis defeated, the militants assaulting the forest will surely retreat! — We wiiiill save Lady Emilia!”

Geuse’s words, and her feelings for her beloved daughter, made Fortuna’s internal hate grow white-hot.

Before, she’d resigned herself to never seeing Emilia ever again. Up until a moment before, she’d intended to see that resolve through. But now, her hopes and her ideals resounded powerfully in her chest.

She’d save Emilia. She’d return home to Emilia. She would be

together with Geuse and Emilia again—

"—O ancient, mystic ice, so cold and white even time shudders, ice so great the soul sleeps eternal."

The mana she had gathered up to strike down Regulus whirled about, seeking a place to explode. She gave that latent energy form, purpose, duty; it took shape, ready to freeze the world.

The sky, the very air moaned, giving birth to spears of ice so enormous, a giant might have wielded them. The tips of these spears, exceeding ten in number, pointed toward their foe, like a bouquet of flowers inviting the opponent to split asunder and rest in an eternal, icy grave.

"My life, my duty, my love… For all their sakes, I…!"

At Fortuna's side, Geuse embraced his own shoulders with both hands as he spun those words of bloody resolve. Power raged under his tattered habit, and his healed body began falling into ruin once more. Blood gushed, bones cracked, and life dissolved.

Seeing the pair's resolve, Pandora merely spread her arms wide, her cheeks flushed.

"Now, come— Let me taste the embrace of your tenacity until the bitter end."

Intending to rip that smile off her face, the pair's power made the world tremble.

And then—

5

—She had already gone well past the white flowers Archi had pointed out.

And yet, her legs did not cease. She was told not to stop running, so she kept doing as she was told.

Her breath leaped. Emilia earnestly stretched her tiny gait as far as it would go as she ran through the forest.

"Uu…uuuu!"

She shook her head. Tears were flowing. She desperately held back the sob that was threatening to leak out from the corner of her mouth.

What was going on and why was all this happening now?

Everyone probably knew something that she did not.

She didn't know anything about what she should do. Was there really nothing she could do?

Who was the one bullying Fortuna, Geuse, and Archi? What did she need to do to get those people back? What were they after—?

“Se…al…”

Back where she’d gotten separated from Geuse, the frightfully beautiful girl had said that word. Hadn’t Fortuna and Archi both mentioned the same *seal*?

“

lifted her face, she saw that her body was surrounded by countless glowing lights.

"Fairy…?"

Emilia called out to the fairies, the supernatural beings that Fortuna and Geuse had termed *lesser spirits*. They did not possess words, yet they responded to Emilia's will, gently moving deeper into the forest—

After a slight delay, Emilia grasped the intent of the phosphorescent lights, which were blinking seemingly to guide her.

"You'll tell me where…?"

There was no reply. The lesser spirits only formed a trail of light leading deeper into the forest.

"If I go that way, I'll get to the seal? I'll be able to save Mom and everyone…?"

The trail of light grew brighter. Emilia wiped her tears away with all her might.

She couldn't stay there sobbing forever. She had her mother and Geuse and all kinds of other people to save, and when she'd broken down crying, the fairies had come to help her. How could she keep hanging her head?

"Yeah… Yeah, yeah!"

Nodding with a mix of thanks and determination, Emilia broke into a run, following the belt of light. She earnestly followed the brilliant path that was created by the phosphorescent glows, believing it was the sole hope she could cling to.

Leaping over holes and climbing over inclines, she made herself smaller as she raced through the gaps between tightly packed trees.

There were many paths where the lesser spirits could pass but Emilia could not. She tripped, branches scraping her cheek, and she fell, spitting out the dirt in her teeth as she rose once more.

"Huu, huu…!"

Her lungs hurt. Fluid dripped from her nose. She wiped off her teary and muddy face, getting angry at her scuffed knees as she ran.

With insufficient oxygen, Emilia found her vision wavering, and her consciousness was like a daydream as memories resurfaced.

Emilia remembered all the time she had spent in that forest, in that settlement, loved as she was.

—She remembered Fortuna's love.

She remembered days when she'd been scolded. Emilia also remembered crying and apologizing and Fortuna spending the

whole night holding Emilia in her arms, continuing to stroke her head until morning, seemingly so that she would not wake alone.

Fortuna had not spoiled her and had been strict, but she had also given her such precious things. Even though she had a habit of saying she was not Emilia's real mother, Fortuna *was* Emilia's mother, her first and most important mother.

—She remembered how Archi and everyone else in the settlement were kind to them.

She understood there was just the tiniest bit of distance between them. She knew they were hesitant, now knowing exactly how to approach her. But everyone had always been gentle to her, and they had absolutely never hurt Emilia or Fortuna. Even the Princess Room was something everyone had worked hard to improve so Emilia would have an easier time. It was difficult being in that place, but she'd liked it anyway.

—She remembered hating Geuse so much.

He was related to the things the adults were hiding, and he'd gone and drawn out the smiling face that was for Emilia alone, so she thought she could never forgive him. Yet, when they'd met by chance, he'd cried the moment he set eyes on Emilia. He cried and cried, crying out of happiness, and so Emilia forgave him.

After all, those were kind tears. Remembering how Fortuna had put her at ease when Fortuna was hugging her, she'd stroked Geuse's head. She wanted to be at his side so that the crybaby wouldn't be lonely.

She'd thought he was so helpless. She'd thought she just couldn't abandon him.

—She remembered she loved everyone so much.

Fortuna. Geuse. Archi. Everyone. They were Emilia's precious, precious people.

"I can…still save everyone…!"

She wanted to sleep in the same bed with Fortuna again.

Next time, she wanted to invite Archi and everyone to the Princess Room.

Next time, she wanted to stomp on that impertinent crybaby Geuse's foot with all her strength.

She wanted to meet everyone again.

"I'll be a good girl, so…"

Her vision hazy with tears, she slipped beyond the usual branches and trees of the familiar forest, her feet halting where the

forest turned white. Her breath was ragged and her face was red when she finally reached the *seal* she'd been seeking—

"—Welcome. I have been waiting for you."

The girl with platinum hair stood waiting before the *seal*, spreading her arms wide, seemingly to welcome her arrival.

CHAPTER 4

THE ETERNAL FREEZING OF THE GREAT ELIOR FOREST

1

—In that phantasmal scene, with everything dyed pure white, a beautiful girl stood, wearing nothing but a single piece of cloth.

It looked as if an artist had exchanged not only his own soul but that of many others, making a deal with some devil to attain the pinnacle of painting for the very first time.

"I am so glad that I found you. I've located the seal at long last, but I had no idea where the Key might be. But I have managed to find you, so I am deeply relieved."

"Why…are you here…?"

The smile the girl—Pandora—wore on her beautiful visage was like a fragrance that toyed with life itself. Posing a question to the girl with such an obviously abnormal presence made Emilia's voice tremble. In response, Pandora brought her palms together before her, smiling broadly like someone about to reveal a secret as some sort of grand finale.

"Tee-hee, surprised, aren't you? It's quite simple, actually. This seal is our goal. We came to look for it… Therefore, my being here was inevitable."

The reply Pandora gave was not the answer Emilia sought.

Emilia was trying to ask how Pandora could be here. The last time Emilia had seen her, Geuse had been keeping the strange white figure and her from going anywhere—

"Why…are you here…?"

"—? Ahhh, I am sorry. I gave a rather odd reply, didn't I? What you want to know concerns Archbishop Romanée-Conti and your mother, doesn't it?"

“—!”

Pandora’s belated comprehension made Emilia audibly clench her teeth.

A proper answer for a proper question. She wanted to ask. She wanted to know. But at the same time, she didn’t. After all, if Pandora was there, what had happened to Geuse?

“Please rest easy.”

To young Emilia’s distress, Pandora spoke that one phrase as a preamble, her charming smile deepening. Her expression flooded with what seemed like simple consideration, wanting to wipe that gloom from Emilia’s face.

“The Archbishop Romanée-Conti and your mother you are so concerned about are both quite safe and sound.”

“R-really…?”

“Yes, really— my believers and I have tried to avoid hurting everyone as much as possible. Just as I told you earlier, this seal is our goal. It is not necessary to sacrifice anyone for it.”

Pandora’s deluge of words, spoken in the kindest possible way, softly melted Emilia’s unease and tension away. Relief slowly permeated her chest.

If she could believe Pandora, Fortuna and Geuse were safe, and perhaps things for everyone in the forest had not gone as terribly as she had imagined. If that was true—

“Once you finish with the seal, you’ll leave…?”

“

“I don’t know anything about that…”

When Pandora made that firm assertion, the clueless Emilia shook her head in denial.

As a matter of fact, she couldn’t remember any such thing. Emilia did not recall ever carrying something like a key, and in the first place, the seal itself had been kept secret from Emilia. She couldn’t think of any possible way for her to have this Key to a seal she didn’t even know about until just recently. And yet—

“I cannot call hiding it from me very wise.”

“Y-you’re wrong…!! I really— I really don’t know! I don’t have anything like a key! No one gave me a key! I can’t open this seal!”

“Is that so? —Well, I will have to rummage through every corner of the forest to search for the Key, then.”

Seemingly disappointed in Emilia’s reply, Pandora lowered her eyes, looking very sad.

Her words and gesture made Emilia’s body tremble. Pandora seemed genuinely sympathetic toward Emilia. But no matter how she felt, she undoubtedly intended to “rummage through” the forest, and its people, until she got what she wanted.

Instinctively understanding that Pandora was fully capable of following through, Emilia desperately tried to think of something.

“I-I’ll open it! I’ll open it!!”

“Ohhh, really? I’m so glad. You really do have the Key, don’t you?”

When Emilia raised her voice, fear racing through her, Pandora’s expression brightened like the sunrise. Not noticing how the abrupt change frightened the little girl, Pandora continued.

“But of course you do. You must have the Key— After all, whatever you may look like, you are still a Witch’s daughter.”

“Witch…?”

“Now, please take care of the seal. If you open this door, I will depart, immediately at that.”

Pandora’s face was filled with joy, looking like she could barely contain her impatience as she yielded the stage to Emilia.

Even as Pandora’s words set her mind astir, Emilia approached the door in her stead. Firmly closed and so tall that she had to crane her neck to see it all, the door felt very weighty and oppressive.

“

The one time she investigated the seal, Emilia had tried getting past it. No matter how much she pushed or pulled or even climbed over it, the door never budged. That wouldn't change now.

The door, as cold as ice, silently and emotionlessly rejected Emilia's tiny palm.

"Ha! …Haaa…ha!… Ah."

Her heart rate quickened abnormally, and she could hear the noisy sound of blood flowing in her head. The inside of her chest grew hot, and the depths of her belly grew cold. Her leaping heart threatened to jump right out of her mouth, and yet, the tips of her fingers felt heavy, as if packed with lead. Though she willed them to move with all her might, they would not.

—If she didn't open this door, something terrible would happen to everyone, she was sure of it.

As fear and despair made her mind a blank, Emilia's consciousness moved further and further away—

"—Think of yourself as the Key."

When Emilia sought something to cling to, that voice smoothly slid into Emilia's earlobes.

—I am…the Key.

Doing as the voice commanded, Emilia's mind settled on a single answer.

That instant, Emilia felt something heavy in the palm of the hand she used to touch the door. She looked at her hand. There, she saw an old, large silver key that had appeared at some point unknown to her.

"Can you see it? If so, you are indeed the Key."

Standing right beside Emilia, Pandora spoke in what seemed a whisper. Her words brought a sound out of Emilia's throat, but she realized the girl could not see the Key herself.

"You don't see this…?"

"—. No, I do not. This Key cannot be entrusted to anyone who does not possess the proper qualifications. There are likely only two people in the world who may hold this Key."

When Pandora murmured with a look of envy, Emilia saw something resembling emotion in her for the first time. But the impression the girl gave off that moment was meaningless. Lifting her face, Emilia turned back toward the door.

Surely, the key in her palm would match the keyhole of the lock in the center of the door.

It was something Emilia understood without having to try and see. Mysteriously, her hand felt accustomed to the key. It was as natural, as obvious as a key she might use to enter her own bedroom.

"Now, open it. Do this, and your wish shall be granted."

When Pandora's voice came to her from…somewhere, Emilia took a single step forward. If she put the key in the keyhole and willed it to "open," then open it would. That was all it would take for the seal to be released from its long, long, truly so very long duty.

If she did that, Geuse, Fortuna, and everyone else in the forest would surely be saved…and yet—

Emilia—I promise.

As she was about to touch the seal, the words whispered by her mother upon their parting echoed in Emilia's head.

They were words exchanged in a promise unrelated to that seal. However, Emilia remembered. She remembered her mother had promised to protect her.

She knew nothing about the seal. She'd made a prior promise never to go to this place.

Emilia did not know about this place, and she was not supposed to know. She was not supposed to have anything to do with it at all.

She and Fortuna had made a promise. And she had to put keeping her promises above everything else. A promise was a creation of trust and she couldn't betray those feelings.

If she became a bad girl, no one would forgive Emilia anymore. She would become unforgivable.

That was why opening the seal would mean breaking a promise.

"I—I can't open it…"

"—Why?"

When Emilia reluctantly shook her head, Pandora spoke briefly, her voice hard for the first time.

Not noticing the change in her tone of voice, Emilia shook her head even more reluctantly.

"I…I made a promise. I don't know anything about the seal. I mustn't open it."

“Is that so? Promises are important, aren’t they? I think your attempt to uphold yours is very righteous and commendable. However, such things have a time and place.”

Gently, Pandora hugged Emilia from behind. Embraced by those slender, gorgeous arms, Emilia trembled from the warmth of someone who was not her mother.

“You made that promise with your mother, didn’t you? Your mother is a most commendable person. She raised you to be proper and good. Such aspirations should be treasured.”

“Th-then…”

“But sometimes, the time comes when you must decide to break a promise. Perhaps it is cruel to ask that of a child so young. However, fate does not take personal circumstance into account. What fate loves most is the struggle against the tides and embracing hope, come what may. What kind of hope do you seek?”

“What kind…?”

As Emilia spoke in a broken voice, Pandora went, “Yes,” smiling like a benevolent mother as she nodded.

“One choice would be the hope that you can keep the promise between you and your mother, not opening the seal and thus antagonizing us, but then overcome these tribulations in spite of that.”

Pandora lifted up her right hand to indicate that invisible hope.

“And the other is the hope that by defying your mother’s promise and opening the seal, we can both fulfill our objectives and harmoniously bring this entire affair to an end.”

Lifting up her left hand, Pandora similarly presented to Emilia another invisible hope.

“

hope that broke her promise.

The sweet, enchanting voice was dissolving her brain. The gentle tone of voice with which Pandora argued her case seduced Emilia's spirit.

That moment, she could not hear her own heartbeats, which had been so noisy before.

All sound had vanished from the world. Even color had been erased, leaving Emilia lost and alone.

Unable to hear even her own beating heart, what remained was her brain—no, her consciousness alone.

She couldn't choose. She couldn't choose. She couldn't choose couldn't choose couldn't couldn'tcouldn'tcouldn'tcouldn't.

Which was the right choice? What should she do to rescue everyone? What did she need to do to help? She wanted someone, anyone to tell her.

Hope, salvation, her mother's teachings—

"—Ah."

"—So you've made your choice. This is your decision, isn't it?"

Amid her white-hot thoughts and her hollow, nebula-like vision, she heard Pandora's voice. Looking down at the hand the child's palm had reached, Pandora cast her eyes, rimmed by long eyelashes, downward.

—Emilia had touched Pandora's right hand.

She had chosen the hope that did not break her promise, that did not open the seal, that saved no one.

"I…made a promise with Mom. I have to keep my promises… I have to, so… Mooom…"

"You believed the words of the mother who raised you until the very end. At the end of your struggle, this is the answer you arrived at, the conclusion reached by your soul. I respect that."

As a steady flood of tears flowed from Emilia, Pandora nodded in what seemed like acceptance.

Then she gently brushed away Emilia's hand, which touched her own right hand, gazing at the young girl with apparent affection.

If Pandora wanted to, she could force Emilia, the key holder, to open the door. That she showed no intent of doing so must have meant there was some kind of tangible goodness inside Pandora.

If so, then—

"—However, please respect the decision I made to teach you

the means to open this door."

It was an expression of her false benevolence. She had no qualms about completely ravaging anything that she didn't find valuable or worthy of respect.

"—Eh?"

In a daze, Emilia let her voice trickle out toward the smiling Pandora.

She saw that Pandora was looking not at her but at the woods behind her. From the grove of white trees, a single figure leaped, charging toward them—

"—Pandoraaa!!"

Howling with every fiber of her bloodied body was a woman with short silver hair—Fortuna. Just how ferocious had her battles been after returning to the forest? Fortuna appeared there, wounded all over, yet the glint of fierceness in her eyes was undiminished as she unleashed tremendous magical power to impale Pandora.

It sounded like the air cracked as long, massive spears of ice materialized in the area around Fortuna. Their aim was true, and with speed greater than an arrow, they streaked toward Pandora all at once.

"Take this—!!"

"Launching an attack without looking around first is quite dangerous."

Speaking calmly, Pandora stepped forward as if to shield Emilia. A moment later, a spear of ice pierced her chest, the next ones going through her hips, her arms, and her legs, shooting through one after another, with the final missile sending her head flying.

"—Aaaah!"

Watching that cruel death unfold right before her eyes, Emilia let out a high-pitched shriek. Having lost its head, Pandora's corpse fell backward, knocking Emilia down with it.

The surreal experience of being pinned under a headless corpse made Emilia scream long and hard.

"…Emilia?"

With that scream bringing her back to her senses, Fortuna was dumbfounded as she called out the name of her beloved daughter.

Her violet eyes showed less a feeling of accomplishment from having felled her mortal foe and more surprise at finding Emilia

somewhere she ought not be. Fortuna raced to Emilia's side.

"Why are you here, Emilia…? You should have left the forest…"

"Is it not cruel to ask *why*? This girl was thinking of you, her mother, as she sped here with no thought other than wanting to save you. If a mother cannot respect and praise the purity of such thoughts, what will the world come to?"

"—!"

As Fortuna wavered, Pandora, right beside her, arched her brows in visible reproach.

Both sets of violet eyes opened wide—Fortuna reacting to Pandora's elusiveness and Emilia because the corpse, supposedly having just died a terrible death, vanished before her very eyes.

"And when you make the same faces, you really do look alike. That's a mother and daughter for you."

"—! I'm not Emilia's mother! It's my sister-in-law whom Emilia resembles!"

"Ahhh, her. How so very rude of me."

Fortuna unleashed an angry cry, and right as Pandora was in the middle of apologizing for it, a sword of ice mercilessly slashed her apart. Her torso was cut in half by a diagonal slice, and fresh blood spilled out as Pandora collapsed backward onto the ground.

"Then I suppose that makes you the mother who raised her. If so, you should be proud of yourself. Your daughter possesses a heart most worthy of praise. I am sure that her real parents would be overjoyed."

"Don't speak of my brother and sister-in-law with your filthy mouth!!"

The fallen corpse vanished, and Pandora stood at Fortuna's side as if it was the most natural thing. Fortuna lopped her neck off with her sword of ice, skewering her torso and shattering it into fragments. The next moment, when Pandora revived behind her, Fortuna closed the distance and impaled her, and when the beautiful visage appeared again farther away, she hurled the sword toward her. The second the tip of the sword caught her slender body, Pandora became a statue of ice, cracking and falling apart an instant later.

"Are you not tired of always rejecting conversation with violence like this? I've been waiting for a moment of calm to have a proper conversation, so how about we start over?"

"—!! I told you not to run your mouth!"

Glancing at the shattered ice statue, Pandora patted Fortuna on the shoulder. As a shudder went through her from the nightmarish sight, Fortuna slammed an open palm into the side of Pandora's face—

"—Agh!"

"Emilia?!"

Emilia, knocked flying by her mother, skidded across the ground's surface, unable to break her fall. Fortuna, going pale at having inadvertently struck her own daughter, hurriedly raced over to her side.

"No!! Emilia, I'm so sorry! Oh no! I didn't mean to…!"

"It hurts that much to be struck. I'm sure your own heart feels pain at least equal to that. Now do you understand just how callous your behavior is?"

When Fortuna picked up Pandora, she yelped loudly and thrust the girl away. When she stood up and looked, she saw Emilia standing right by the seal, same as before. There was no sign that her cheek had been slapped.

"Are you relieved to know nothing happened to her? Could you not share just a little of that sentiment with an opponent you detest? I am not telling you to love everyone as if they were your own daughter. I am merely asking that you be slightly more considerate. You should keep at least a tiny bit of this in mind."

"What stupidity are you…? Who?! Who would listen to a single thing you say…?!"

"—Then how about this? Convince your daughter with your very own mouth. I have confirmed that the girl possesses the Key, but she refuses to open the door even so to uphold a promise made with none other than you."

The negotiation she'd conducted with Emilia made Fortuna's breath catch. Emilia, trembling under her gaze, hardened her own cheeks, desperately turning her tear-clouded eyes toward her mother.

"If you rescind that promise, there will be no chains left to bind her obstinate heart. All I require is for the seal to be lifted. Once it's done, I promise to distance myself from this forest without doing anything else. *Promise*… Such a wonderful word, yes?"

She had no apparent intent to ridicule; no doubt these were her true thoughts. There was no malice in Pandora's affection- and

envy-filled words. It was that very lack of malice that made them so powerfully, wickedly sarcastic.

Within Fortuna's vision, Emilia clenched both her hands, awaiting her mother's words. Her hands were bulging from grasping something—because she held the Key that could unlock the seal.

If Fortuna spoke a single word, Emilia would open the sealed door. If that action would save the forest, her young heart was determined to offer everything for it—

"—I'm sorry, Emilia. I'm sorry I made you go through all this."

Fortuna walked toward the door—nay, to her daughter, embracing Emilia tightly as she spoke. From this hug, she could tell that the young girl was shaking.

Parent and child rubbed their silver hair against each other's cheek, sharing warmth as if to confirm the other's presence.

"Emilia, I'm truly and very… You came here alone? What about Archi?"

"Archi…told me to run as far as the white flowers… That's why…I ran…"

"—!"

Hearing from Emilia what Archi had told her, Fortuna realized that the young elf's life had reached its end.

The unfortunate end of the young man who had told them that they were *family* filled Fortuna's chest with sadness. However, Fortuna did not show a tearful face to the daughter she embraced.

Just how many lives had the minion of that vicious Witch stolen around the forest…?

Even so, Fortuna was proud of the decision her daughter had made.

"Emilia, Emilia…you did well to keep your promise. Good girl. Good girl."

"Mom…! Mom, I—I—!"

"Emilia…you are my pride. You are my treasure…"

As her daughter nestled close, Fortuna gently embraced her.

Pandora's face grew hot, seemingly entranced by the sight. Her expression was as if she wanted to monopolize the world's most beautiful scenes all for herself.

"I have had my fill of beautiful love between parent and child. To love and be loved is marvelous indeed…"

"I don't feel very warm and fuzzy hearing that from you— I won't break the seal. I won't hand over this girl. My reply is the

same as Emilia's. Turn into an ice statue and wither here, would you?"

"Do you not think such a cruel statement is bad for your daughter's education?"

"Nothing can be worse for her education than having a conversation with someone like *you*."

Rejecting Pandora's very existence, Fortuna channeled the mana around her once more. Sensing that renewed hostility and increasing magical power, Pandora pursed her lips with a forlorn expression.

—The next moment.

"After sooo long, I have finally caught up with you—!"

His voice was tinged with madness, yet the man held on to an even greater sense of duty as he rushed onto the battlefield.

Leaping over the tall, pure-white trees was a man wearing a habit—Geuse—passing through the sky high, fast, and with enough force that one might think a giant had hurled him.

"Geuse!"

"Lady Fortunaaa!"

Fortuna and Geuse called out each other's names, and that was all it took to link their wills together. With Pandora standing by the sealed door, Fortuna and Geuse were in the perfect position to conduct a pincer, unleashing maximum firepower from front and rear.

Fortuna gripped Emilia's trembling right hand with her left.

Emilia stared up at the side of her mother's face.

—As she gazed straight ahead, ready to boldly confront her opponent, she was beautiful enough to make one tremble.

“Al Hyuma—!!”

“Unseen Haaands—!!!”

The unparalleled destruction woven by Fortuna combined with the maximum amount of heresy Geuse could derive from the power of the Witch Factor. As such incredibly devastating power swelled, the sky of the Great Elior Forest cried out in agony—

“—Mom?”

An invisible hand pierced Fortuna’s chest, bathing Emilia’s entire body in her mother’s fresh blood.

2

Emilia felt the hand holding her own grow limp as Fortuna’s body collapsed before her eyes.

“With thiiiiis—it is over!!”

Howling, Geuse landed as he waved around his blood-soaked hand. Seemingly pulled by his gesture, Fortuna’s body traced a similar arc as it danced in the air. Strength drained from Fortuna’s limbs as she was cast away like a doll and tumbled across the ground— Blood poured ceaselessly out of her body.

“I felt that striiike her… After sooo many tries, thiiis time…”

His breathing ragged, Geuse murmured as he knelt on the spot.

Emilia did not hear his voice, nor did she see the state he was in. Emilia saw Fortuna alone.

“

check…”

“Geuse…?”

“

“I… For what purpose have I…?!”

“—All was for love.”

Having lost his mind to madness, a lament echoed through Geuse’s despairing soul.

With a quiet voice, Pandora replied to Geuse’s mournful question.

“You offered your own soul to save the one you love. That is something few people are capable of. For so very, very long, you supported the Witch Cult day after day for the sake of love. All your actions are the product of love. The path of love is marvelous indeed.”

“Love… Love, love…love, love… Love…!!”

“Yes. There is nothing you need be afraid of, nothing you need regret. All was inevitable; the path of fate led you here. Having come this far, you must continue down this path— ‘Your love is not mistaken.’”

“For love…!”

Repeatedly jamming such sweet nothings into his ears, Geuse felt his mind well and truly shatter.

Dropping to his knees, light fading from his eyes, he fell into oblivion, unable to move.

Gazing at the sight of Geuse so stricken, Pandora smiled, quite satisfied with herself.

“Emi…lia…”

And at the same time Geuse’s mind had been smashed, the fires of another life were going out.

“Mom…”

Hearing her name spoken by such a faint, fading voice, Emilia called out again in a daze.

Embracing her mother with trembling arms, she found it heartbreaking how much lighter Fortuna’s body had grown. At some point, her blood must have flowed in such great quantities that it stopped coming out at all.

If the bleeding had stopped, was her mother’s wound all right, she wondered?

Emilia’s mind was so young; there was no way to protect it without holding on to some kind of hope. Anyone could see that Fortuna, no longer retaining any power to move, was on death’s door.

“…Bro…ther…I’m…sorry.”

“Mom.”

“I couldn’t…protect anything…you told…me to…”

She voiced her regrets, her tone like that of an apologizing child.

With nothing left to bleed, the only thing that came out were Fortuna’s tears.

Feeling the heat of those tears with a touch of her finger, Emilia tried with all her might to gather them up.

She did this thinking them the sum total of her mother’s life force at that moment.

“My sister…will be a-angry, huh…? She won’t forgive me…for this…will she…?”

As she listened to her mother’s words, Emilia belatedly realized.

The light had long faded from her mother’s violet eyes. Those eyes could only shed tears; they could not see Emilia’s face. She didn’t realize Emilia was at her side.

No matter how much she touched her, no matter how much she held her, nothing was getting through.

To her mother, Fortuna, who was crying and begging for forgiveness like a little child, Emilia—

“—Mom, I forgive you.”

“

Lovingly.

“Such a crybaby.”

“

When Pandora presented that heinous argument like it was perfectly normal, Emilia understood everything.

She understood for what purpose this demon, standing before her in the form of a person, had done such things. This demon had acted for no reason other than to make Emilia break her promise.

For nothing more than that sake, she had caused Fortuna to die and Geuse's mind to break and had thoroughly trampled the forest underfoot.

"Oh yes, I forgot something— Come on out."

As Emilia adopted an emotionless expression, Pandora made an inviting motion with her hand toward the air in front of Emilia. When she did so, faint, phosphorescent glows floated up all around Emilia, and these countless lights slowly moved toward Pandora, gathering as she beckoned. The lights added a surreal beauty to her already enchanting visage.

They were fairies—or rather, lesser spirits.

They were the fairies that had led Emilia to the sealed door, showing her the way.

Why had they gone over to Pandora…?

"I was not convinced you would come here if left to your own devices, so I asked them to help, you see. They are such dependable children."

When Pandora smiled, conveying her thanks to the lesser spirits, her words made the lights happily sway about.

—When had it all started? Emilia no longer knew.

Wobbly, Emilia's own head swayed as she looked up at the sealed door.

The door leisurely looked back down at Emilia, as if waiting expectantly for the moment it would be opened. She belatedly noticed the heavy sensation of the Key firmly in the palm of her hand. At some point, the Key had reappeared within it.

"The Key… I'm so glad; it seems you still had it. You understand what to do, then?"

With Pandora smiling in front of her, Emilia quietly trembled.

She gently slid her mother's head from her lap, lightly resting it atop the grass. With a finger, she toyed with her mother's hair before carefully arranging Fortuna's beautiful face. Her hair was short, colored silver like Emilia's own. She gently removed the

floral accessory from her mother's beautiful hair, replacing it with Emilia's own.

Finally, she put her mother's floral accessory into her own hair. With that, she and her mother would be together…always.

And then—

"Die."

—surging cold welled up to form seemingly innumerable blades, turning Pandora's flesh into bloody mist in a single instant.

The gushing blood instantly froze. Vivid flowers of red ice bloomed in a chaotic pattern.

A single pillar of ice stood at the epicenter, petals of fresh blood scattered all about. It was a sculpture of ice and death.

"What a violent thing to have done to me. What has gotten into you all of a—?"

"Die."

Stakes of ice poured down, drilling into Pandora's limbs, and a spear of ice thrust out of the ground's surface, impaling her from her waist to the crown of her skull. Her frozen body, bathed in impacts from above and below, made a high-pitched sound as it shattered into tiny pieces.

"Please calm yourself. Surely, we can understand each other if we only speak."

"Die."

Mighty blocks of ice closed in from left and right, crushing Pandora's body and cruelly transforming it into a pathetic lump of flesh.

"You are a gentle girl deep in your heart. Doing this will only make your mother sad."

"Die."

A spinning blade of ice rose from below Pandora's feet and sliced her to ribbons, sending crimson lumps of ice flying.

"You are betraying the numerous wishes placed in you…by your parents, Archbishop Romanée-Conti, and your mother, as well."

"Die—!!"

A white cloud enveloped Pandora, transforming her body into an ice statue. A mighty sword of ice swung downward a moment later, not slicing but rather, smashing the statue, scattering it in chunks across the ground with tremendous force.

Pandora was slain again and again in a tempest of bloodlust

and countless, inexhaustible, violently creative means of destruction. And yet—

"How troublesome. It seems this has caused the opposite of the intended effect."

"Die, die, die, die…!!"

As she sobbed and wailed, Emilia poured icy destruction upon Pandora over and over.

However, even as Pandora assuredly died each and every time, she instantly revived just as quickly.

"D-die… Die…"

Each time Emilia strained her young body to cast magic, she drew closer to her limit. She cast spells one after another even though her body couldn't support it, her face turning red as her lower half began to freeze over. She wasn't expelling it fast enough and the increasingly vast store of mana she had drawn into her body was beginning to go out of control.

"Such an incredible amount of mana…and a Gate that can manage all this… It would seem a Witch's progeny cannot flee from fate— Perhaps you were brought to this forest to make sure your blood continued to slumber."

Emilia did not understand the meaning of Pandora's comment, but she shook her head to reject it all the same. Her right leg had completely frozen over; it was difficult for her to even stand straight. She went down to one knee. Her murderous violet eyes shot right through Pandora; the sight of bloodlust in one so young made Pandora lower her own gaze.

"This is most unfortunate considering my greatest desire is right before me, but I shall leave it at this for today. Any more, and it seems I will only make you push yourself further."

"Die, die, die, die…!"

"We have accomplished much today: learning of your bloodline, confirming the existence of the Key, and the birth of a new Archbishop of the Seven Deadly Sins— More importantly, taking the seal and leaving is more than sufficient… Oh my."

Her arbitrary conclusion that left no room for discussion was the very epitome of conceit.

But as Pandora put her spin on the situation, white crystals suddenly entered her field of vision.

—Snow.

Emilia's absurd level of mana had gone berserk, warping the

climate itself to the extreme and causing snow to fall.

At first, it was a flake here, a flake there; however, the force and strength of the snowfall soon increased, growing powerful enough to be properly called a snowstorm.

"—From the looks of things, you are about to enter a rather long slumber."

Looking up at the falling snow, Pandora then turned to Emilia, the cause of the dramatic shift in weather.

Already, the frost had reached Emilia's hips; she was no longer able to move either arm.

"Your power will cover this forest in ice that shall never melt. At some point, your mana shall reach its very limit, or perhaps it shall be offset by someone whose power rivals your own. Until then…"

"Die, die…!"

"Unfortunately, I shall not. When the snow melts and this icy winter comes to an end, we shall inevitably meet again. But I would feel very lonely if you were to hate me when that time comes."

As Emilia spat curses, Pandora gently touched the young girl's forehead with a fingertip.

Emilia's violet eyes seethed with hatred as Pandora smiled at her with an innocent face.

"You will 'completely forget about my existence in your memories up to this day.'"

"—Ah."

"Go ahead and fill the gap however you like. Ah, yes. You kept your promise with all your heart and soul. Carve this deeply into your heart. I would be pleased if you remain just as you are now."

Frozen up to her chest, Emilia's head reeled, her unfocused gaze lingering on the world around her. Her eyes were spinning, drool spilled from the corner of her lips, and the inside of Emilia's head had been all stirred up.

Randomly, unwittingly, the pages strewn over the wall of her memory rearranged themselves as they pleased, creating innumerable inconsistencies.

The words that had been exchanged vanished into the distance, and she forgot the love she had been given, leaving only fear and a sense of guilt behind—

—The important thing that did not vanish…was her promise.

She absolutely did not forget she had upheld her promise. Nor

had she forgotten she had to uphold her promise.

—She'd kept her promise. The promise had been kept.

"I wonder just what colors shall greet your heart and what kind of smile you will show me the next time we meet? I look forward to the day when we shall see each other again."

Even amid the ferocious snowstorm, Pandora's voice carried clearly as she walked forward, stroking her own platinum hair.

Geuse, still in a daze as he knelt, was buried up to half his body. When Pandora whispered something into his ear, he stood up with an emotionless face.

The pair, Pandora and Geuse, departed the snowy forest, walking side by side.

All Emilia could do was watch them go.

Her body had continued to freeze, the ice already reaching a part of her face. Only in her eyes did Emilia's consciousness remain.

Abruptly, Emilia realized she was gazing downward.

There was an unnatural clump of snow on the ground right in front of her.

It was as if someone was being embraced by this pure, snowy-white landscape.

"

possibly know, the last moments of her homeland she could never have witnessed, all of it—Emilia remembered more than the memories she had lost.

—She remembered everything that had happened.

Through this journey, which had filled the gaps in her memory, she had walked the path that led to her regrets. Just how sinful was the tranquility she gained by forgetting her regrets?

She had seen for herself all of young Emilia's days, all she had forgotten in order to go on living up to this day.

Fortuna's death, Geuse's madness, the reason her homeland had been encased in ice, everything—

"If you wish to blame yourself for the falsification of your memories, I believe you would be in error."

Abruptly, as Emilia drifted in the chasm between memory and consciousness, a voice addressed her.

It was the Witch standing beside her—Echidna. She turned her cold eyes toward Emilia as the girl hugged her own knees. Just like Emilia, Echidna had witnessed these regrets from beginning to end. She gazed at Emilia's younger, frozen self.

"You and your family faced off against the Witch of Vanity. Brandishing her flimsy, self-serving logic, she employed her power to 'rewrite' phenomena as she pleased. There is no question that it was the Authority of Vanity that caused your warped memories."

"The Witch of Vanity…"

"An exceedingly filthy Authority. Your younger self outstripped Pandora in simple terms of power, but that was due to her being particularly ill-matched against your strengths and nothing more."

Apparently, Echidna looked down even upon Pandora. Perhaps Emilia ought to have said, *As expected of a Witch*.

Echidna's barbed demeanor since coming into contact with Emilia was unchanged, but never before had Echidna replied so readily to one of Emilia's questions.

"Can I ask you about Pandora?"

"…I tend to be fond of conversing with others, but where you are concerned, I decline. I don't like the cheeky thought process behind such questions: *It might be too much to ask, but I'll ask anyway* and their ilk."

"Is that how it is…? Well, thank you anyway."

Hearing Emilia give thanks despite being insulted, Echidna twisted her lips in disgust.

Emilia actually found Echidna's unchanging attitude incredibly comforting at the moment. That was how staggering Emilia's past had been. In a true sense, the restoration of her memories had turned her entire life upside down.

—She'd committed body and spirit to the royal selection to save everyone in the frozen forest, and yet…

"I'm the one who made them all ice statues… Everyone who tried to save me…"

Unable to respond to their feelings, she'd ended up shutting everyone under the snow, freezing them completely.

Once freed from the ice, Emilia had spent her time in the forest without any memories of her regrets. She'd spent every day continuing to speak to the people who had become ice statues—never realizing she was trying to atone for her own feelings of guilt.

Now she understood why her memories had been sealed away. Even had Pandora not interfered with them, she might have wanted to forget them regardless in a moment of weakness.

"You have remembered the past and seen your regrets to the end. However, the Trial is not yet finished."

The memories that led to her regrets had finished playing out. Echidna made a comment as she stared at the silent world's snowy landscape.

"The past has been revealed without difficulty. You challenged the Trial, and your journey to reach your worst, most terrible mistakes, which gave rise to your regrets, is at an end. Now you must provide your answer."

"An answer to the Trial…"

"The first Trial is to see if you can succeed in breaking from your greatest past regret. You can accept or deny your own past. Rejection is another choice. I respect whatever conclusion you may choose."

Emilia deeply exhaled hearing Echidna's words, which somehow sounded rather passionate.

By climbing onto the stage known as the Trial, Emilia had finally confronted the past she had wondered about so many times.

Having lost her pact with Puck and reclaimed herself after he had indulged her for so long, Emilia had uncovered her own memories at long last and made it this far.

"All that said, perhaps you are even more at a loss. After all, the starting point of your resolve has been tarnished. The sin that

turned your mother, your friend, and your family into ice statues belongs to none other than you."

Echidna's words sliced into Emilia like a blade. The frozen forest, her people who'd been turned into ice statues, the forest being corrupted by the plague-bearing demon beast, the loss of her mother, and the breaking of Geuse's mind—

Emilia had left the forest because she wanted to save everyone in the village—to save her mother.

And yet, the motivation for that decision had turned out to be a fairy tale that misled her starting from the first and most crucial step of her journey, leading to nothing but pain and disappointment — What was left for such a girl to do?

"—I've been taught the answer to that already."

When Emilia's heart flirted with self-doubt, there was one thing that gave her the strength to steady herself.

—Don't give up. Look forward. Raise your head high. Look straight at me.

Over and over, time and time again, he'd told Emilia those things.

He'd scolded Emilia for being weak, for giving up. Without any basis, he'd declared, *You're the best.*

Their teeth had hurt when they'd clumsily butted together, but the heat of their tongues meeting had lit Emilia's heart on fire.

"Mom loved me."

"

What I regret is that I didn't have enough power to do anything at the time. I regret not being clever enough and not trying hard enough. But I absolutely don't regret following Mom's instructions and refusing to do whatever Pandora told me."

After all, hadn't Fortuna said it right at the very end?

She'd said she was proud of Emilia for keeping her promise. She'd said Emilia was her treasure.

—Those words themselves were a treasure that would stay with Emilia forever.

"You cannot save your mother. Does that not make your struggle meaningless?"

"That isn't so. Mom… I couldn't save her. But I don't know if that's true for everyone else yet. The others might still be waiting even now, sleeping inside the ice. And I'm the only one who can save them and bring them out."

"They've been ice statues for over a hundred years, and the forest was contaminated by the Black Serpent. Even if you manage to undo the freezing, what if their bodies have been eaten away by plague? What if nothing remains of the land of your ancestors?"

"That's speculation, and horrible speculation at that. Everyone's waiting inside the ice to be rescued. If I don't wake them up as soon as possible, they'll definitely have a good reason to be angry with me. If they live well after that, I'll smile and be glad."

"A foolish delusion."

"No, it's a prediction of a happy future!"

When Echidna tried to cut her off, Emilia stepped forward, firmly making her own declaration.

Boldly facing the white-haired Witch, Emilia gestured toward the vast, snowy landscape with her hand.

"I won't let anyone deny a possibility just because they haven't seen it yet! I won't accept that everything Mom left me will meet such a tragic end! I will make Mom's ideals a reality!"

"Ideals? Just what is it you claim that your mother sought?"

"Mom told me. Someday, we'd all leave the forest and live normal lives. A world where Geuse and his people could get along with all the villagers, where Subaru can tell me he loves me, where Geuse and Mom can walk side by side—I'm sure it exists!"

"And do you see the frozen villagers in that world? Villagers frozen by your very own hand!"

"I'm so, so sorry about that. I'll apologize over, and over, and

over until they forgive me! And if they do forgive me, I'll introduce the world to them then. I'll tell them there's no need to live in seclusion anymore. I'll tell them this is the world Mom talked about!"

Drawing in her breath, Emilia shouted out the words brimming in her chest.

At some point, the pair had begun to stand amid not a landscape of snow but a world of enveloping white light.

The cold wind pricking their skin was gone; the scene dominated by so many regrets had faded away. Not noticing even that, Emilia puffed out her chest, speaking in a loud voice.

"I'll preach her dream until my voice gives out and keep saying this until Mom up in the sky can hear me!"

"I'm happy to be in the world Mom loved—!"

—That instant, the world split open with a roar.

Seeing cracks running across the white space, Emilia finally realized the scenery around her had changed. As she opened her eyes wide in surprise, Echidna, now standing right before her, breathed a deep sigh as she brought her hands together before her own chest.

"—I see. I understand now. I had thought I understood, but you are more of a pushy, insolent, conceited, and arbitrary proponent of hypocrisy than even I imagined."

"I suppose I am. Is that bad?"

"Not exactly. I do not particularly care, after all. It is merely that in those respects, you are exactly like your mother."

As Echidna grimaced, furrowing her refined eyebrows, Emilia raised her own in surprise.

"You know my mo… Not Mom, but my other mother?"

"I know her, yes. It would be false to claim she isn't partly responsible for why I become so emotional when I interact with you. She always did have that *Why is it always you…?* jealousy about her…"

Echidna turned away in a huff, the sight of which threw Emilia terribly off as she opened her eyes wide.

Simultaneously, Emilia's vision became cloudy, and her consciousness felt heavy. Slowly, she felt heat passing into her

limbs, and in her heart, she understood she was waking from a vague, ambiguous dream.

"With this, the Trial is at an end. However conceited your conclusion, there is no mistaking that you have come to terms with the past. Considering you've used your mother's sacrifice to bolster your resolve, do try to see your selfish, arbitrary wishes through."

"Say whatever you like, Echidna. I'm used to your insults by now."

Placing a hand on her hip, Emilia turned straight toward Echidna, who was venting hateful things until the bitter end. The boldness of her demeanor made Echidna wearily shake her head.

"Two Trials remain. I would like to expect much pathetic anguish from you, but…"

"Eh, wait! There's still more Trials to go? Two more? Three in total?"

"It does amount to that, yes. Your surprise makes me want to gloat a little…but I must say, with considerable regret, that I do not think the remaining Trials will hold out for long against you."

"Really?"

"An irreverent attitude is self-doubt's greatest enemy. The Trial, meant to pick at what lies inside you, is particularly ill-suited against who you are now. In one sense, you have abandoned logic, after all."

"Hey, you're kind of making it sound like I never use my brain, which is *really* rude."

Echidna's lecture caused Emilia to puff up her cheeks in a show of clear dissatisfaction. However, there was no time for further exchanges. The Trial, and her opportunity to converse with the Witch, was reaching its end.

Echidna was enveloped by light, and in that brilliance, Emilia's consciousness began to disperse as well.

At the very end, as she dissolved in the light, a malicious smile came over the Witch of Greed.

"—I hate you."

"I don't hate you all that much, though."

Even without seeing, Emilia had some idea of what kind of face her reply had provoked.

—The Trial was over.

When she regained consciousness, Emilia made a small groan as she felt something hard pressed against her back.

Apparently, the cold sensation was from a wall that her back was leaning against. Having lost consciousness against it, she seemed to have rested her weight there while traveling in the dream.

Reaching a hand out, she touched the wall. The wall bore scars from the crude carvings upon it, and the very part she was touching had *I Love You* written in I-script. The nice coincidence brought a smile over her.

That moment, she wanted to be greeted by Subaru's words more than anyone's.

"—I'm *really* grateful."

Though there was no way for Subaru to hear it, Emilia quietly thanked him.

The Trial was over. The forgotten past had returned to her, and she had set eyes upon her sealed regrets. It had no doubt been Subaru granting her courage over and over amid those scenes.

She finally realized for herself just how much she had been protected by the feelings of others.

In the past, it was Fortuna, Geuse, and Archi who had protected her heart. After, she had always relied upon Puck. In the present, Subaru, Ram, and Otto were the ones who supported her.

Terrified of her sealed past, she could have been convinced she could rely only on herself, refusing to show any weakness—only to spend all night sobbing, her frail heart crushed.

It was thanks to everyone that it hadn't come to that— In both past and present, Emilia was blessed.

Emilia had never once been alone since that fateful moment. That was why.

"—I'm sorry, Mom."

Her slightly loosened lips tensed, and a seemingly suppressed voice trickled out of Emilia.

Her words of apology echoed in the dimly lit stonework room and were immediately followed by the sound of a nose sniffling.

Tears poured out one after another, unceasing. She could not hold them back. She could endure it no more.

In the tomb, with no concern about anyone seeing the tearful face she'd absolutely refused to show the Witch out of pure stubbornness, Emilia pressed her head against the wall with loving

phrases carved into it, letting her emotions all come to the surface.

"Mom… Mom…!"

A flood of tears and a wave of nostalgia toward her gentler memories continued to spill out.

They were tears that should have flowed before…a full century before.

In that stone room, no one could see Emilia finally getting a chance to grieve for the mother she couldn't remember for so long.

This way, when she left in plain sight, none need know of her crying face.

She wouldn't have to show her weakness to the person who'd told her he loved her despite her weak faults.

She cried, she cried, she wept… She sobbed. And then…

As she mourned her mother's memory, her mother's love, all the things she was grateful her mother had given her…

—Emilia continued to cry, her face pressed against *Love* the entire while.

5

She wiped her tears and smacked her cheeks. Putting her disheveled hair in order, she diligently smoothed out the creases of her sleeves.

She wondered if she wasn't making a shameful-looking face that moment.

Puck, who was normally so fussy about Emilia's grooming, was no longer present. She could not feel the warmth from the cracked crystal at her neck, which had always been by her side.

"…But I'll definitely find him myself, so…"

No matter where he might be, there was no sign that the cat spirit had vanished from this world altogether. She was sure her contracted spirit, and her surrogate parent for all that time, was out there somewhere.

"Plus, without Puck here, I *really* seem to be wasting excessive amounts of mana…"

As she murmured, Emilia was getting dizzy from the vast quantity of mana welling from her entire body. Now that she had regained her memories, there was no room to doubt this was all her mana.

Emilia's power was sufficient to single-handedly freeze the

forest that had been her homeland. Puck had most likely put in a fair bit of effort from the shadows to keep Emilia unaware of that power.

All of it had been to keep her from confronting the memories she subconsciously kept sealed.

"Oh, Puck, you really are overprotective…"

With a thin smile, Emilia lightly flicked the crystal with a finger. After that, she took a big, deep breath.

Filling her chest with cold air, she thrust out all the weak feelings lurking inside her body.

"—Okay!! I'm all right now."

Emilia made this powerful declaration, speaking it for her own benefit.

Her chest hurt when she thought of Fortuna and Geuse. Even at that very moment, she felt like she might break into tears if her guard lowered even slightly. But she couldn't bawl her eyes out forever.

Emilia had so many things she had to do. And surely, by doing these things, she would fulfill Fortuna's and Geuse's expectations, continuing onward to the future they had wished for.

She touched the floral accessory adorning her hair. In her heart, she'd always remembered this was a most precious heirloom from her mother. Just as she'd wished back then, Fortuna had stayed with her—always.

"After this, there are two more Trials…but first."

As she spoke, Emilia headed outside the stonework room for the time being. She didn't understand how to begin the second Trial, but she wanted to go to Subaru and the others waiting to hear from her outside.

She'd made everyone worry so much, to the point of getting into a big argument with Subaru and finally making even Puck distance himself from her— But she'd faced her past.

The things she'd remembered about her past were far from completely kind. She didn't have a firm grasp on it just yet, but there was a good chance those memories had greatly shaken the foundations of her being.

But for that moment, at least, she wanted to return and face the others with a simple sense of accomplishment.

At the end of the stonework corridor, a breeze blew in from outside the tomb. The time was past evening, and the tomb glowed

blue to welcome its challenger. Silver moonlight poured down from the sky.

The moon's illumination was bright enough to make Emilia narrow her eyes. She slowly looked down onto the grassy clearing when—

"—Welcome back, Lady Emilia."

The fact that Ram, greeting her with polite formality, was standing all alone made Emilia blink and tilt her head in confusion.

CHAPTER 5

THE RED DRAINED FROM THEIR LIPS

1

—Let us rewind the tale once more.

Having been told the true past of how the Sanctuary had come to be and the truth hidden behind that past, a group of individuals, who were now aware of everything, had fulfilled the conditions required to march onto the stage and ask a certain man his true intent.

—It was time to confront the schemes of Roswaal L. Mathers head-on.

Their spirits high, Subaru and the others charged down the path from the tomb to the settlement with hasty steps. At their destination, the mastermind who had created the entire plot awaited them.

“In terms o’ wicked deeds, I think ya ain’t half-bad yerself, General.”

“You make me sound so bad… Forget winning or losing; being cunning the way Roswaal is is definitely a bad idea. What if people started pelting me with eggs on my way home all the time?”

“Just what kind of concern is that supposed to be? Throwing eggs at a person would be quite a waste.”

Even as they spoke oddly past one another, Subaru and company reviewed their situation and what they knew. In particular, sharing information with their newest companion, Garfiel, was an urgent priority.

Since they could not leisurely take their time, the explanation was fairly rushed, inevitably making it confusing.

“Actually, Garfiel, how much have you been cooperating with Roswaal anyway?”

“Me and that bastard? …No way in hell. We’ve talked about you and Lady Emilia for maybe a hot second, max. Also, haven’t talked with ’im since the first day you ’n’ the others arrived, General.”

“That’s some pretty extreme dysfunction there… Ah, no, I get it, I get it… I just didn’t think you’d hate the guy so much, even if he is your romantic rival…”

“…Not like that’s the only reason. Me, I just don’t like the bastard.”

Averting his gaze, Garfiel murmured in a low voice. Garfiel and Roswaal had to have been acquainted for over a decade. Subaru couldn’t understand the complexities of the feelings between them from an outside glance.

But Subaru sighed hearing Garfiel’s reply, which he felt confirmed his concern. Because if Garfiel’s antagonism toward Subaru wasn’t due to any direct orders from Roswaal…

“He had the Ryuzus and Shima, then there’s Ram obviously, even Emilia would count… Geez, just how many hooks did Roswaal have in you, Garfiel?”

“His prior preparations put us at a complete disadvantage, and on top of that, he’s made meticulous preparations to strike his foes down. Wouldn’t the time to run be now?”

“Sorry to disappoint, but this party’s current policy is *Safety First While We Let ’Em Have It*.”

Subaru replied to Otto’s appeal with a flippant remark of his own. Seeing that Garfiel was left perplexed by their exchange, Subaru elaborated.

“In other words, the covert activities spearheaded by Roswaal, the mastermind behind the current situation, are no joke. It would’ve been simpler to take care of it if you’d simply made a deal with him to oppose liberating the Sanctuary, but…”

“No way I’d strike any deal with him! Me, I tried to tear out your throat outta my own free will, General!”

Howling as if ready to bite then and there, Garfiel gripped the crystal dangling from his own neck. This subconscious action seemed motivated by a need for physical reassurance of where exactly his will stood.

Garfiel was most likely racked with worries of his own. Just like

how Ryuzu had been bewildered by Shima's story about the Sanctuary's true role, the revelations served as the starting point of Garfiel's defiance.

Anguished, Garfiel was caught between Subaru and Otto as the latter glanced at the others' faces.

"If we are to believe Garfiel's own statement, the marquis enjoys an advantageous position because of his astoundingly good fortune."

"That's way scarier. If there's one stat the three of us are short on, it's luck."

Subaru and Otto exchanged grim faces as the pair let out a sigh. Garfiel knit his brows, less out of surprise and more because he was feeling creeped out by their gloomy behavior.

"Hey, why are you and Bro all calm about this, General? If you two are right, the bastard's the one completely controlling everythin' in the Sanctuary, right?"

"So you really were keeping up. That's right. If it's like that, it's seriously bad."

By using the people who had started on his side to begin with as much as he could and manipulating those who were not with crafty rhetoric, Roswaal had inextricably tied the events surrounding the Sanctuary and the mansion together. If Subaru had to name names, it was doubtlessly Subaru as well as Emilia who topped the list of pawns Roswaal had deftly led around by the nose.

And he'd even woven into his strategy the wild card named Garfiel who'd caused Subaru to suffer time and time again—just how much planning had Roswaal put into this scheme?

—The obsessiveness and tenacity to carry such a thing out truly was in the realm of a monster—a devil.

And Subaru and company were heading to the location of that very devil. Seeing Subaru and Otto bantering a bit right before they confronted that devil, it was quite natural that Garfiel felt confused.

"In the first place, General, why'd we come all the way just to see the bastard…?"

Suspicion rested in Garfiel as he voiced an entirely natural doubt that he had. However, unfortunately for him, there was no time for a reply. After all—

"—We've arrived."

Subaru's brief phrase brought all three pairs of feet to a halt. Straight before them stood a small stonework residence—the

temporary abode where Roswaal, the mastermind of the situation and the enemy they had to defeat, awaited them.

“Not that we have an appointment…”

Amid tension that could not be expunged with one flippant comment, the trio stepped inside the building. The air within the structure was dry. They could sense a person behind the door at the back of the building—that was where Roswaal was.

Standing before that door, Subaru hesitated for a single moment. And then—

“—Come in, young Subaru. After all, I only finished preparaaations just now.”

“

the others standing at the room's entrance.

—His face was daubed white, with suspicious-looking eyelines and reddened lips. It was the clown appearance that Subaru was accustomed to.

Standing up from the bed, Roswaal hid his painful, bandaged body under his eccentric outfit, the tenor of his voice and his actions lending him an aloof air. He stood there as a devil who had no need to conceal his own obsession.

The sight of him was so striking that Otto, who was seeing it for the first time, visibly shook. Glancing at that, Subaru slumped his shoulders in Roswaal's direction.

"You were so worked up about us coming that you dressed your best to welcome us. I'm gonna blush."

"Why, it is nothing that need conceeern you. After all, I have told you, have I not? That I would face you in a suitably prepared state once more."

"Ah, you did, come to think of it."

Roswaal certainly had said something to that effect as Subaru departed upon the conclusion of the conversation where he'd challenged the man to one final contest. Of course, Subaru never thought he would actually greet him with full makeup on.

"In the first place, to me, putting on makeup is nothing less than preparing for battle. When girding myself for a contest I cannot afford to lose, makeup is a means of self-motivation, you seeee."

"I see, so it's literally war paint to you…… Wait, for real? You're not saying that to pull my leg?"

"Well, I shall leave to you whether to believe it or not. Preparing myself properly for battle and greeting you with this appearance…I believe this amply demonstraaates my resolve to you?"

Subaru took Roswaal's low and deeply suggestive voice to mean that to him, it really was his equivalent of war paint.

Just like Subaru was betting everything this time around, Roswaal was pouring all his strength into this battle. It was mutual understanding that made the two of them stand before each other as true competitors on the same stage.

"Now, let us return to the first question, Subaru— Why have you come here?"

This was the first serious question Roswaal posed to Subaru

upon his arrival to this room, but it was also what Garfiel had wanted to know earlier as well. Prompted for an answer, Subaru caught his breath. They had come here with one objective.

Namely—

“—I’m here to demand your surrender.”

2

—A demand for surrender meant nothing less than a formal acknowledgment of defeat.

“

“You’re really something, Otto. Looks like you weren’t included in his future-seeing book of prophecy, either.”

“I am not pleased whatsoever by that, and I cannot conceal my surprise at such utterly incomprehensible comments!”

Otto genuinely flared up at Subaru for making a comment that was totally inappropriate for the mood.

The original reason Otto had come with Subaru and Emilia was because Subaru had promised to introduce him to Roswaal. From there, he would no doubt negotiate over the value of his cargo of oil and discuss the nature of his contributions in defeating the Witch Cult. Given that starting position, it stood to reason that Otto would be angry that Roswaal didn’t even know who he was. But—

“Such an individual’s presence in this place cannot help but determine which way my contest with Subaru will sway. I see; in other words, he is ‘that.’”

“Yeah, I suppose. Otto is ‘that.’”

“—?”

Roswaal was certain of something, and Subaru nodded in affirmation.

It was only Otto, the subject at hand, who looked completely at a loss as to what topic he apparently stood at the very center of.

Otto didn’t understand. He was completely unawares. It was Otto’s very existence that was—

“—The first slip of the gears.”

Surely, Roswaal had painstakingly constructed his game board as if assembling a precise machine.

Using all the wisdom and knowledge at his disposal, the devil had plotted out the movements of every pawn placed in advance so as to invariably drive Subaru to Return by Death, no matter what course the events might take.

An unknown piece from outside had leaped onto his game board, which had been carefully arranged like a precise machine—

“The flow’s been altered, all thanks to my friend, who’s too insignificant to be recorded in your book of prophecy.”

“…Allow me to formally ask you for your name.”

Roswaal quietly asked for the name of the laborer who had created the distortion in his meticulously calculated machinations. Subaru took a step back and gave his friend a shove.

The force made Otto advance a step. He took a single breath, after which he bowed to Roswaal.

“My name is Otto Suwen. I am honored to have this opportunity to set eyes upon the noble marquis in person. Though I am nothing more than a humble traveling merchant, I hope to become your acquaintance.”

“I shall remember you, Otto— Next time, I absolutely will not lose sight of you.”

After Otto invoked his own name, Subaru was the only one who gleaned the true meaning from Roswaal’s reply. That was how keenly Subaru understood that the wariness Roswaal directed toward Otto was dead serious.

“Oh man, Otto. Just like you planned, you left a serious impression on Roswaal!”

“This is not exactly the way I hoped to be remembered by him!”

He’d most certainly left an impression, but it would have been better to remain little-noticed and easily forgotten.

Either way, Roswaal’s internal wariness toward Otto had risen precipitously. At the same time, it had become considerably clearer how exactly the situation had changed and why they demanded his surrender.

“Thanks to young Otto, you managed to regain your footing, making you inclined to challenge me to one final contest, I take it?”

“That’s how it is… But isn’t this a little strange? Usually, it’d be the main heroine who has a scene to get me back on my feet. Won’t it betray audience expectations if we have a male character telling me to hang in there instead?”

“Even if you look at me with such reproachful eyes, I have no idea what you want from me!”

“I’m kidding, kidding.”

As a matter of fact, if not for Otto, the entire faction would have collapsed by this point. It was emotionally impossible for him to thank Otto for that up front, but his gratitude was genuine nonetheless. That, and—

“

individual truly embodying change. Seeing that his gaze did not alter the color on Garfiel's face, Roswaal opened his lips with a look of dejection.

"I suppose I must say you have finally been well and properly tamed, Garfiel."

Garfiel, who was disappointing him so, was standing behind Subaru and Otto. He'd taken a position that was prepared for any unforeseen circumstances, as he could shield the two simultaneously at any moment. This was what brought a sigh tinged with reproach out of Roswaal.

"And so you, who have been so strongly set on tearing into outsiders, now find yourself gladly on young Subaru's siiiide. I am surprised you would have a change of heart so quickly— You had protected what is precious in your heart for so very, very long, and yet, you discard even your love for your mother with such ease."

Roswaal's words were a blade he used in an attempt to stir up what lay at the center of Garfiel's core. Like a surgical instrument for opening one's chest to extract the internal organs within, his wily words were meant to expose Garfiel's desire to all.

These were the feelings of love toward his mother and enormous regrets toward the past that he'd continued to harbor for so long—

"Stop it, Roswaal. What the hell do you understand about Garfiel's feelings?"

"Of course I understand nothing of them, nor do I wish to. Losing a fight and the cheap words you replied to him with were all it took to sway his feelings. What can I call them, then, save shallow?"

As Roswaal piled insult upon insult, it was not Garfiel but Subaru who flew into a rage.

Subaru had slammed into Garfiel, traded punches with him, and directly heard the cry of his heart. He would never let anyone dismiss them as light or cheap.

"Hold on a sec, General."

However, it was none other than Garfiel himself who halted the angry Subaru.

Surely, it was Garfiel who was most hurt by Roswaal's words of scorn. Subaru tried to intercept them rather than let them wreak havoc on the boy's heart. But.

"It's your words that are cheap as dirt, Roswaal."

Crossing his arms like he was bored, Garfiel clacked his fangs and spat those words at Roswaal.

His demeanor took Subaru by surprise. Noticing this reaction, Roswaal slightly raised an eyebrow.

If Garfiel had been the person he was just a short while ago, such grave insults would have triggered a fit of rage. Yet, there he was, ignoring it as if brushing a warm breeze aside.

“Me, I ain’t denyin’ I’m half-hearted about things. It’s true I teamed up with the general just a few hours ago. Guess you saw that as a real quick change of heart.”

“First a change of heart and now defiance? The feelings you dwelled upon for so long to date… The time you devoted to your wish, day after day for ten long years, is by no means a brief span. I wonder, where have those feelings vanished to?”

Shrugging at Garfiel’s reply, Roswaal narrowed his eyes, growing ever colder. His handsome, differently colored eyes looked clouded by stagnant emotions that did not suit their beauty at all.

With those emotions still hovering in his gaze, Roswaal continued his verbal attacks on Garfiel.

“Desires do not simply vanish into thin air. If you truly loved her, your feelings would surely never change. Are your ten years of work something that can be changed with such ease?”

The tone of Roswaal’s voice, seemingly full of lament, grew hotter and darker still.

“Just how much contact have you had with young Subaru over a mere few days? Have you and he amassed a bond to rival that love? Surely not. As if anything could rise as high or reach the same depth of your love—for that is how it is when you put one thing above all else.”

His voice was quiet, yet heated all the same. What had begun as censure for having a change of heart had become a plea, an earnest wish; merely listening to it struck one’s heart with sadness.

—To him, what was most precious to you was what you stripped away everything else for.

Previously, Roswaal had said as much to Subaru. And this was the nature of Roswaal’s love. To Roswaal, this was the only way to love something; he recognized no others.

“…Or perhaps, you did not love her at all, Garfiel?”

Hence, Roswaal attempted to deny Garfiel’s change, which violated his life philosophy.

He denied Garfiel, who had nurtured his love for ten years, yet determined his conclusion had been mistaken and required something new.

“Do you not love your mother, your family? Is that why you can devote your heart to something else so easily? Rather than employ the strength you honed for so long, merely having your fangs broken was sufficient to bend the feelings you kept for a decade? If that is so, then the one who made your love a brittle, fleeting forgery is none other than yourself.”

With no change in his expression, it was with words alone that Roswaal castigated Garfiel for his change of heart.

These words of blame, which seemed like they’d claw a wound into Garfiel’s heart, made Subaru regret bringing him along for a single instant— Yes. His regret lasted for only an instant.

“—Man, your words are so weak, Roswaal.”

Garfiel did not reply with emotion, though his demeanor was barbed. Somehow, there seemed to be pity in his gaze.

“Like I care if ya wanna scold me. Just don’t misunderstand me.”

“…Misunderstand?”

“For me, it ain’t like I follow the general just ’cause I lost a fight. Yeah, losing hit hard, but I ain’t soft enough to flip sides from somethin’ like that.”

Garfiel audibly tapped his forehead with a finger as he clacked his fangs. In contrast to Roswaal’s quiet, smoldering zeal, Garfiel’s tenacity was serene.

“It’s just like ya said, Roswaal. I was hung up on the past all these last ten years… I don’t exactly remember tellin’ ya all that, but at this point, I ain’t gonna act surprised about ya knowin’.”

“

challenged the tomb to face his past once more.

“Ya don’t ‘win’ against your past. That’s what I thought. That’s why I ain’t laughin’ at you for bein’ stuck, thinkin’ the same way I did back then. What’s there to laugh at?”

“

need to be shaken or to grieve about?

“It’s gotta be the same for you. I told you, Roswaal. I… We don’t want to keep butting heads with you forever. If we just aim our ways of doing things in the same direction, we’ll get where we want to go together. There’s still time to pull back.”

At that moment, the game board Roswaal had carefully crafted was heavily crumbling away. With the plan shifting beyond his control, he could still stop being Garfiel, Subaru, and everyone else’s enemy. He could still—

“—Stop the assassins you sent to the mansion. Then we can hammer out everything else.”

Roswaal’s scheme had crumbled, and the problems enveloping the Sanctuary and the mansion were beginning to reach their conclusion. If Roswaal accepted Subaru’s demand for his surrender, they could bring everything to an end.

Accordingly, believing there was value in trying regardless of the danger, Subaru had come here to make his play.

It was Subaru’s silver ray of hope. And Roswaal—

“—I refuse, young Subaru.”

“

“Indeed I am. Just from bringing in a piece from beyond the game-board and removing Garfiel as an obstacle, you believe yourself to be in a superior position? Yet, as before, I have the upper hand.”

Touching a hand to his breast, Roswaal repudiated Subaru’s assertion, declaring it completely off the mark.

“Everything at present is as you spoke. And so long as that remains true, my advantage does not change. You have no means to stop me. This very moment, you hear the familiar footsteps of defeat drawing near, do you not?”

“—!”

Roswaal was implicitly referring to his own scheme of dispatching assassins to the mansion. He was claiming that so long as the attack on the mansion and the existence of the assassins remained, Subaru had no chance of victory.

Not in the Sanctuary, not in the mansion, would Subaru lose anyone. There would be no casualties—those were the conditions for Subaru’s straight bet with Roswaal.

“That is the challenge you yourself proposed.”

Roswaal advanced a step, unerringly striking Subaru’s inner feelings with his words.

Given the height difference between the pair, Roswaal looked down at Subaru, peering into the boy’s black eyes as he continued.

Mercilessly, cruelly, as if declaring a just and proper verdict, he continued.

“What of the conditions of your wager? You have limited your greatest weapon to become an ordinary person.”

Roswaal ploddingly continued his advance.

“As ordinary as you are, what more can you achieve? What more can you undermine?”

Roswaal continued even further, his words gradually growing more heated.

“You will do nothing. You can do nothing. After all—”

Cutting off his words, his two differently colored eyes contained identical rage within them as he continued.

“After all, you—are garbage, lower than an ordinary man!”

He raised an angry shout. Roswaal slammed simple anger against an incompatible existence.

As a man who constantly lived with the apparition of his own death—nay, a man who could calmly carry on even while standing

within a swirling vortex of death—Subaru Natsuki's decision to avoid death seemed irrational to Roswaal, which only fed his anger.

"In the end, you've made it this far because of that power that you've used as a trump card against whatever might come. In willingly tossing it aside to become ordinary, what can an untalented man like you do?! I will not suffer any who try to violate the sanctuary of feelings that have been carved out over countless days and months! No one! However many you bring with you, this cannot be changed!"

Garfiel's obsession with the Sanctuary was the distortion of ten long years' worth of love toward his family.

Emilia had a hundred years' worth of sins—enough that she wanted to forget them, with feelings of guilt for having abandoned them piled on top.

And—

"A decade, a century, and then my four centuries—as if all this could be overturned by none other than an ordinary man like you!!"

"…Because feelings don't change?"

"That's right!"

"Because you've kept on believing in those feelings for a really long time?"

"Yes, indeed it is!"

When Subaru inquired, Roswaal acknowledged everything.

He was saying that feelings were something no one could overcome. He was saying that feelings were not something that could be changed or altered.

"

cherished.

Hoping that his own feelings might be affirmed, he was supportive of people who were devoted to their loved ones.

Come to think of it, that had always been so. The feelings Subaru held toward Emilia, the feelings Rem had held toward Subaru… Roswaal was always accepting of those things, wasn't he?

That was because Roswaal had a belief. He believed in the strength of feelings, the preciousness of bonds.

More than any of them, Roswaal believed in the concept of cherishing someone else. And yet—

"Why do you have to see feelings as nothing but weakness? You understand how strong and powerful it can be for someone to treasure another person for a long time. Why do you have to focus on how it's weak?"

"—Because that is what I believe."

Roswaal's voice bubbled with emotion as he replied to Subaru's words.

The glint in both his eyes, blue and yellow alike, intensified into an incredible glower of fiery indignation.

—Before challenging him to their final wager, Roswaal had said this to Subaru.

It is impossible for me to hate you. I trust you, from the bottom of my heart.

At the moment, Roswaal's eyes seethed with anger, glaring with a killing gaze at the man he hated most in the world.

"Just like how you believe in others' strength, I believe in remaining weak! Because I believe people are weak, frail, puny beings able to accomplish nothing unless they cling to a single, important thing!"

"

found the sight so very painful.

Four hundred years—if Shima's story was to be believed, this was the span of time over which the Mathers family had administered the Sanctuary generation after generation, just as Echidna the Witch had asked.

The same way each subsequent head of the Mathers family bore the name of Roswaal, each also inherited the duty of administering the Sanctuary. Roswaal had confused the name and the duty with the meaning that rested behind them.

He'd made his family's long-cherished desire his own, and it was for this reason that Roswaal had always lived. The genius Roswaal walked a path that any normal person would have abandoned without compunction.

Simple respect and love toward a benevolent mentor had been distorted to become a curse binding an entire family line, giving birth to a single devil.

This was the man who inherited the Mathers family's long-cherished desire four centuries long—Roswaal L. Mathers.

"…The advantage remains on my side. Part of what is written is in error, but what of it? What I desire is results. The conditions have not shifted meaningfully, and you will never achieve your goals without changing them, powerless as you are."

After he took some time to breathe, his voice regained its composure.

Even so, his assertion had in no way changed. He did not accept the demand for surrender, and he didn't see the balance of power shifting in the near future. And the greatest proof of Roswaal's claim was—

"—The contest is not over so long as the one who is the cornerstone for both of us remains."

Roswaal implicitly indicated that the basis of his certainty in his own victory was the girl challenging the Trial that very moment.

Just like he believed in human weakness, in Garfiel's weakness, Roswaal believed in hers.

He believed that Emilia was weak. That Emilia was fragile. That Emilia would remain a weakling lacking the strength to overcome her regrets.

"—Don't underestimate Emilia, Roswaal."

Once cowed into silence from sheer momentum, Subaru spoke, his heart roused by Roswaal's argument.

He could not stay silent. Just like how Emilia had chosen to stop cowering.

"Emilia won't do as you planned anymore. That girl will overcome everything in her way."

"As if she could. With no one to rely upon, she shall be crushed by her regrets. Her great hope that she can change will end in sorrow, and she shall cling to you in tears… That is what suits her."

"There ain't a woman out there suited to a crying face. Have you seen Emilia's face when she cries…?"

The flame had been lit. Roswaal's statements had enveloped Subaru's heart in crimson.

—Roswaal had made him remember how Emilia acted inside the tomb just before their argument.

He'd seen Emilia stricken by her weighty responsibilities and by grief for her lost connection with Puck. He'd seen the expression on her face when she'd glared at Subaru with tears of unendurable emotions—

"—She's so awful at crying, I never want to see her do it again!!"

"She will be hurt. She will be ensnared. That is the destiny of a half-elf. That is the curse she bears for being born of the same bloodline as the Witch of Jealousy. It is inevitable for her to be despised as a Witch."

"Oh, stuff it. What about that girl makes her a Witch? Where the hell is this Witch you people keep talking about?"

Once, it was Roswaal who had howled, his ferocious emotions bare. This time, it was Subaru's turn.

Lifting his head, Subaru grabbed Roswaal's collar. Opening his eyes wide in anger, he glared point-blank into Roswaal's differently colored eyes, making full use of the foul look he'd inherited from his mother.

I don't like it. Yeah, I don't like it at all. Right now, I don't care for a single part of this world.

"If you're gonna call that girl a Witch—! If that's what you all want, then you'll make that girl into a Witch, damn it! If you keep saying *of course she's weak*, *of course people despise her*, *it's all her fault for being born as something she can't change*, you'll turn her into a poor little Witch yourselves!!"

In the back of his mind, he thought of the Witch's Tea Party—to the seven Witches of the past bearing the names of the Seven

Deadly Sins.

Typhon, Daphne, Minerva, Sekhmet, Carmilla, Echidna.

And before that world had broken apart, there was Satella, who'd doted on him to the very end.

As if he could forget. That face—it was the spitting image of Emilia's.

"Has even one person told her that it's all right?! That when you're sad, when you're suffering, that it's all right to cry?! And that if you can't wipe off the tears rolling down your cheeks, ask someone close to do it for you… That you have people who'll do that for you. Have even one of you said that to her?!"

No one had let Emilia cry, even though she'd been piling up so much bitterness, suffering, and sorrow. That's why when that girl cried, she was so awful at it. Restraining your sobbing voice, hiding your crying face…these were things you did to protect yourself when crying, things you learned from people making you cry over and over.

She'd spent her days in ignorance of that, which was why that girl was so bad at crying.

"If no one's gonna do it, I will. These feelings…this curse! You don't think there's any room for them ever changing? We'll beat that right out of you!"

Thrusting Roswaal away, Subaru pointed a finger toward the heavens.

Mysteriously, it was the same pose Emilia adopted that very moment, displaying it to the Witch slamming malicious words at her inside the Trial.

"—My name is Subaru Natsuki! Knight of the silver-haired half-elf Emilia!"

Once, Subaru Natsuki had spoken these words without resolve behind them, causing a great throng to laugh in mockery at his rashness.

Looking back on himself at the time, he was even more lacking then than he was now.

But there was one thing that was different from back then.

—No matter who laughed, Subaru Natsuki would never feel ashamed of his determination.

"Emilia's coming, Roswaal. The girl you stubbornly believe to be weak is coming to cut off your last ray of hope."

"

“That’s how she’ll strip you of all the weakness you’re clinging to, and when you’ve hit rock bottom and you finally let us talk to you… At long last, you’ll be willing to listen then. That’s what I believe.”

Roswaal’s obstinate heart did not crumble, even though he’d witnessed Subaru’s resolve and determination.

It had been as he’d asserted over and over to that point. Time amassed across four centuries was not something that could easily be changed with one word or one deed.

It was just like how amassed words and deeds made Garfiel’s ten years and Emilia’s hundred begin to move.

It would be through Subaru’s and the others’ actions that their words would reach Roswaal’s four hundred.

—That was what he wanted to believe.

“—You really are as I judged you to be, Subaru Natsuki.”

“What?”

With Subaru having finished, Roswaal quietly called out his name.

They exchanged glances. The vehement emotions had vanished somewhere; Roswaal’s eyes were serene as he looked at Subaru.

Then, faced with Subaru’s questioning look, Roswaal’s lips trembled.

“You and I are alike. I mean this, in terms of bending ideals for those we cherish.”

“—You believe in weakness. I believe in strength. That’s the only way I agree that we’re alike.”

Subaru and Roswaal, rejecting each other’s incompatible philosophies, put distance between them. Beyond that, it would be through actions, not words, that they would prove their claims true.

“Let’s go.”

The talk was over. Subaru called out to the pair in attendance with him and left the room. Otto followed behind him without a word, and Garfiel, last to leave, looked back at Roswaal but once.

Roswaal was left all alone. Perhaps Garfiel saw some significance in that as he murmured in a little voice like an afterthought.

“—Stupid jerk.”

With negotiations thus ending in failure, Subaru and the others left the building and butted heads together.

The prior exchanges had slammed their respective resolve and true feelings against one another. Roswaal's motives were clear, and that brief span of time was so intense, he had made them accept that he'd reset the game board to an even playing field.

As a result of those exchanges, there was one thing that Subaru could say for certain.

"This is bad. I wanted to stop the attack on the mansion, but it was like he was saying, *Go away—there's no pulling back now.*"

"I cannot really deny it felt like our original objective had turned to half-baked negotiations midway…"

"Hey, Bro. Don't blame the general too much, all right? By the general's standards, he really laid into the guy. Me, I felt good just listenin' to it."

"Were it not a place for negotiations to resolve matters peacefully, I would agree with you…!"

When Subaru tried to reflect on things blowing up, Garfiel irresponsibly cheered him on. The sight of the pair made Otto clutch his head, genuinely in a bind.

"Not that I expected that the marquis would truly surrender, but why did talks break down so badly when a quiet end would have been preferable…?!"

"Certainly, Garfiel and I did bad things there, but the responsibility's yours, too, right?"

"My responsibility? I did nothing to warrant anything so great as…"

"Well, I mean you were there, right?"

"I'm responsible just by merely existing?!"

That was somewhat inaccurate. More precisely, Otto was responsible for triggering the situation that had led to him joining Subaru at that meeting—thereby fatally ruining Roswaal's setup.

Though, since Otto himself had no idea that was going on in the background, telling him of his responsibility left him sure it was a scurrilous accusation.

"Anyway, this isn't the time to trade jokes with one another. Roswaal won't stop the attack on the mansion. That means we need to go running back there without a moment to spare. That's what it means, but…"

Their negotiations falling through meant the various problems

surrounding the mansion would continue unabated. Just as Roswaal had said, if they didn't prevent the attack, the contest would inevitably end in Subaru's defeat.

There was virtually no time left until Elsa and Meili, the assassins dispatched by Roswaal, would assault the mansion.

As Subaru nervously gritted his teeth, it was then that Garfiel went, "Now hold on," and clacked his fangs. "I ain't really had a proper explanation, but the gist is that the bastard's got some scheme that puts the bunch at the mansion…including my older sis, in danger. That 'bout covers it?"

"—. Yeah, that's right. He's sent assassins to the mansion, and they're super skilled. I don't stand a chance against 'em. That's why I need combat power to…"

"Short talk, then. Let's stop shootin' the breeze here and get to the mansion right now."

"Hey, listen to me! Even if we go back, we don't have the combat power! It'll just jack up the body count!"

"Ahhh?! What are you talkin' about, General?! You sayin' I'm not enough…?!"

"Yes! Please halt a moment right there!"

Wedging himself into the pair's increasingly loud exchange, Otto stopped their arguments midway. After, he went, "Now, look here?" as he stared at their faces respectively. "It's clear the flow of the conversation has shifted, but do you understand, Garfiel?"

"Understand what?"

"Going to the aid of the mansion requires leaving the Sanctuary. Lady Emilia is in the middle of her challenge, but the tomb's barrier remains intact, so if the barrier stops you…"

The issue is moot, implied Otto, revealing the gap in Garfiel's line of thinking.

But when this was pointed out to Garfiel, he crinkled his nose, undaunted.

"Barrier…? Ain't no problem. The barrier don't affect me 'cause of my makeup, y'see."

"—Huh?"

When Garfiel touched one of his canine teeth with his finger and tossed out a brief explanation, Subaru and Otto both voiced the same reaction. Faced with their questioning gazes and voices, Garfiel went, "I'm sayin'," clicking his tongue. "I'm an exception—the barrier that keeps 'mixed' people from passing through don't

work on me. Same as my older sis, I'm a kid from a mixed-blood dad and a human mom. My blood's too thin, so the barrier don't work."

—Accordingly, there was nothing stopping them from going to the mansion's aid right that minute, even without the barrier being lifted.

With Garfiel so bluntly divulging the circumstances of his birth, Subaru was completely at a loss.

He'd most certainly heard previously that Frederica had slipped out of the Sanctuary due to the thinness of her mixed blood—in other words, because she was a quarter-blood. However.

"It's the same for you…? B-but I heard you and Frederica have different fathers?!"

"…Well, ya know. My mother, she ain't got any luck or any eye for pickin' men. You figure it out."

Garfiel looked away. From that, Subaru felt his words rang true.

In other words, Garfiel and Frederica's mother had given birth to children from two different mixed-blood, demi-human men. As a result, both siblings could pass through the Sanctuary's barrier unhindered…

"Ah? What gives, General?"

"Whaddaya mean, *what gives*? Say that earlier, damn it! If you knew that, you…youuu!!"

"Well, I didn't know 'cause you didn't tell me all this, so it's your own fault, General! It's just like how *Ipshiz was ruined through too few words*!!"

"Yes, yes, yes, yes! That is quite enough! Quite enough!"

Just as the pair was about to come to blows, Otto intervened once more, intercepting Subaru before his inevitable pummeling.

"You can both reflect on explaining too little hereafter. Right now, we should think of this as good fortune indeed, seeing as how the greatest obstacle before us has been removed— Mr. Natsuki, we can do this."

"I know! If we can all cross the barrier, this boils down quickly!"

With Otto's shout flipping a switch in his mind, Subaru made an instant decision based on this change in conditions.

If they could all cross the barrier, they could take Garfiel with them when returning to the mansion. If Garfiel was with them, it became possible to confront Elsa and Meili.

But in turn, it was necessary to employ a variety of countermeasures for the numerous problems that remained in the Sanctuary. He'd already arranged all the preparations, but—

"After that… Garfiel!"

"Aah?"

"We'll graciously handle everything except brute force. But where brute force is concerned, even if we stand and fight, we can't beat these people. That's why…"

Trailing off there, Subaru stared squarely at Garfiel.

Garfiel had been dissatisfied over not being able to follow the conversation, but his expression switched in the blink of an eye.

"To be blunt, I still don't get a lot of what's goin' on, but…"

Garfiel's two jade eyes gave off a fiery glow as he smiled, baring his fangs.

"Leave all the fightin' to me— Me, I'm the best there is."

5

"So what do you intend to do now?"

Returning from the forest to Subaru and the others, only to find some ruckus happening in front of the Cathedral—the building where the evacuees from Earlham Village had grouped up—it was Ram who spoke first.

The people of Earlham Village had clustered here, busy murmuring and holding different conversations. In front of the assembled gathering of evacuees were Subaru and his companions, and if she could put what they were doing into words—

"You are preparing dragon carriages to slip away during the night? Now, at a time like this?"

"You're making it sound bad. But you're not wrong about the *call late at night and then again first thing in the morning* feeling— From here, Otto, Garfiel, and I are heading toward the mansion. Re… Frederica and company are in danger."

Subaru replied to Ram as he hitched his beloved pitch-black dragon, Patlash, to a two-dragon carriage. The reply made Ram raise an eyebrow. "To the mansion…," she murmured. "The result of Lady Emilia's Trial is still pending. What will you do?"

"Emilia'll clear it. Echidna's not gonna get her bent out of shape. How are Ryuzu and the others?"

"Caring for Miss Shima. Ram is to remain on watch until Lady

Emilia returns."

"Got it… In that case, I'll leave that role to you. Counting on ya."

"Counting on me, are you, Barusu? You are such a…"

There was sharpness mixed in Ram's voice; perhaps she thought him irresponsible. However, it was natural for her to see it that way. Abandoning them during a situation like this would make Emilia angry, let alone Ram.

Even so, he had to go. Rem, Frederica, and Petra were waiting. Besides—

"—General, sorry for the wait! I'm back!"

"I have completed preparations as well. We can leave any moment!"

In high spirits, two voices interrupted Subaru and Ram's conversation. Then both respectively leaped onto the dragon carriage: Garfiel onto the roof and Otto onto the driver's seat.

When performing the final checks for Otto's plan, they'd headed to the cabin to collect something Garfiel had forgotten.

"I was the strongest before but now I'm even stronger, ha. Now I ain't losin' to anyone, not even you, General."

Garfiel seemed extremely enthusiastic, his words bringing both surprise and a wry smile out of Subaru. Then Subaru looked behind him—toward Ram and the people of Earlham Village arrayed at her back. Of course, Ram still had an unconvinced face on her, but the people of Earlham Village bowed deeply in response to his gaze.

"It's like you heard, everyone! From here, we're heading back to the mansion a step ahead of you! Sorry for this all being out of order, but…"

"You need not be concerned, Master Subaru."

A voice interrupted Subaru's words; it hailed from an old woman with a stooped hip—the head of Earlham Village. She trained her hoarse voice and her eyes, which were filled with a bounty of kindness, toward Subaru.

"All of us have already heard about it from the Administrator. And have you forgotten?"

"

He remembered. It already felt so long ago, for it was on the first day they had visited this place— There, at the Cathedral, Emilia had promised to liberate the other villagers from the Sanctuary.

The village head—no, not her alone but everyone from the village—believed in her.

"You worry needlessly, Master Subaru. More importantly, you have your own duty that you must fulfill, yes?"

"Don't get cold feet in a place like this. Please go quickly."

"Ahhh, you'd best wipe off what's left of that nosebleed midway, though. Don't wanna disappoint Petra."

Following the head of the village, the other villagers offered their own voices of support one after the other. What they said varied, but all were meant to bolster Subaru and the others' decision. That was of great help to him.

"Thanks, everyone. But don't forget what I said. Wait until…"

"—Right up to the limit, and only until then. Why, if the barrier is lifted before that, all is well."

"That's why, Master Subaru, you should give up already and let us help you this time."

Their powerful, imposing words completely stopped Subaru from saying anything.

Let us help you. The person who spoke communicated the united will of the villagers. To add anything more would be crude of him.

When presented with so much resolve, what could one say? Subaru had no way to put his feelings into words.

Accordingly, he bowed his head. Then the remaining problem was—

"Ram, there's no time to explain every fine detail. But all of them understand their own roles. Emilia, too. So for you…"

"—Fine, then. Do as you please. Ram shall do as she pleases as well."

Seemingly out of other words, Subaru offered a final parting remark to Ram, who snorted in return, her arms crossed. Wincing from her reply, Subaru scratched his cheek with a finger.

"Hearing you, someone who normally does as she pleases, say *that* is super scary for some reason…"

"Ha. Yes, do be afraid— Barusu, you're really all right with this?"

"Yeah. I already told Emilia all the words I wanted to tell her."

“The carvings on the wall, you mean.”

“Why do I feel like I’ll never live that down?!”

Replying to Ram’s teasing in a loud voice, Subaru then rummaged in his pocket, touching something that felt hard with the tips of his fingers. He exhaled a light breath.

“—Ram.”

Addressing her, Subaru drew it out and tossed it toward Ram. She softly caught the object.

“Don’t do anything crazy.”

“Who do you think you’re talking to, Barusu? Don’t make me laugh.”

Smiling wryly at Subaru’s words, Ram quietly put the caught object into a pocket on her maid outfit.

From this point, no more words were spoken between them. Everything that needed to be exchanged had been. All that was left was for each of them to work their hardest toward their respective best outcomes.

“—Let’s go! We gotta reach the mansion before the crack of dawn. I’m counting on ya, Patlash!”

Climbing into the dragon carriage, Subaru shouted, bringing a loud neigh from Patlash, who was hitched to the wagon. Spurred by that neigh, Otto’s beloved dragon, hitched alongside, gave off a low growl in turn.

Slowly, the two-dragon carriage began to move, and their sprint out of the Sanctuary had begun.

“Um, incidentally, I heard a term earlier that I cannot easily dismiss. Who is this Administrator of whom everyone from the village spoke…?”

“—We’re leaving!!”

Overwriting and obliterating Otto’s question, the dragon moved, deploying its wind repel blessing.

Inundated by the villagers’ cheers of support, the dragon carriage raced through the night toward the forest, the road…and the mansion.

CHAPTER 6

LIES TO HOPE

1

"—And so three fools ran off to the mansion in a dragon carriage pulled by two wise land dragons."

Having finished giving Emilia the details, Ram seemed exhausted as she put a hand to her brow.

Emilia was just a little surprised that Ram would visibly show how she really felt for once. That said, her surprise was hardly with Ram alone but with Subaru's and the others' chaotic ways as well.

"Mm, I understand what you have told me… Goodness, he really is incorrigible."

"Sheesh," Emilia went, sighing deeply, after which a thin smile came over her.

Her gaze firmly fixed upon the expression Emilia was giving off, Ram narrowed her pink eyes with a questioning look.

"…Is that all you have to say?"

"I think so? Ah, of course, his leaving without waiting for me makes me just a little…yes, *really* just a little, tiny bit annoyed, but…"

After all, he'd seen Emilia off to the tomb with such grandiose fanfare.

So what was up with him slipping away instead of staying to greet her and see things through to the end?

"But I guess he didn't think there was any way I'd fail, huh."

Really, if Subaru was more worried about Emilia than anything else, he surely would have been there. And yet, he was not, which meant there was someone, in a place not here, who he needed to worry about more than Emilia. There was someone he could not

help but go galloping off toward.

—It was because she knew that Subaru Natsuki believed in her that she could think that way.

“I really am a little angry, though. I wonder, does Subaru really love me?”

“…Barusu cares more about Lady Emilia than any other.”

“Mm, thank you.”

Unknown to Subaru, Emilia was currently trying to confirm his feelings toward her. Seeing that same Emilia smiling pleasantly made Ram lower her eyes, somehow pleased with how things had turned out.

“Lady Emilia, since you’ve returned, does that mean…?”

“You mean the Trial? Yes, that was… Er, it might be a little difficult to call it resolved. I properly faced my past…but it doesn’t seem to be over yet.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Trial doesn’t end at one. There are two more…and it seems the barrier is only lifted after that. So I’ll need to go back into the tomb afterward…”

The truth spoken by Echidna was shocking, but it didn’t change what Emilia had to do.

Setting aside the fact that Subaru and the others had ridden off on a separate mission, Ram, the residents of the Sanctuary, and the people from Earlham Village might have to wait a little longer, but Emilia wouldn’t stop moving forward until she reached the end.

“You really have become strong, Lady Emilia.”

Perhaps Ram murmured thus because she saw the resolve in Emilia’s eyes. Feeling an odd hesitance in her tone of voice, Emilia quietly waited for Ram to continue her words.

The quiet continued as Ram fell into silent contemplation for a time. Finally—

“—Lady Emilia, I am very sorry.”

“…It’s *really* rare to hear you apologize. What is it all of a sudden?”

“Ram thinks so as well… This will be the first time Ram bows her head to Lady Emilia in earnest.”

Emilia made a pained smile as Ram forthrightly stated that her formalities had been perfunctory to date. Taking in this smile directly, Ram gazed at Emilia, her pink eyes boring straight into Emilia’s violet ones.

And then her apology, or perhaps her confession, began.

“Up to this point, Ram did not believe that Lady Emilia could stand on her own two feet. Your heart was broken by the Trial, and you lost even the Great Spirit, who was your foundation… I had wondered, how could you possibly find your footing now?”

“

“He is completely possessed by obsession, obsession that has bound his heart like a curse for a very, very long time. Perhaps, Ram was fine with him like that even so. Perhaps, Ram was fine even if he did not look her way, even if he thought of Ram as nothing more than a useful tool with which to satisfy his obsession.”

Still offering the deepest bow, Ram candidly revealed what lay hidden within her chest.

Perhaps, as she constantly gazed at Roswaal, this was the hope Ram had continued to nurse at the bottom of her heart, under an emotionless mask… It was the hope that she was fine with being a useful tool alone. However, now Ram refused that way of being.

“But his obsession has already strayed far from the path. He has lost sight of the objective that is the foundation of all his hopes, and Master Roswaal clings to his text in name alone… I beg you, break his obsession.”

“Will Roswaal be all right with me breaking it?”

“He will not. He will most certainly panic. He will lose his reason to live and might well collapse completely. However, Lady Emilia, you are the only one who can do this. Perhaps, by moving Master Roswaal away from his way of life that has buoyed him all this time…my feelings might succeed in reaching him.”

This was an earnest plea. Bowing her head, Ram kept the tone of her voice normal, but she was earnestly pleading.

Emilia did not properly understand even half the words her plea contained. But Ram’s wishes, Ram’s feelings, were genuine. That, she understood. And that was enough.

“What should I do?”

“—Please sit upon the royal throne.”

“

Deep inside Emilia's chest, she felt emotions that defied description as they bore down on her like never before.

That moment, Ram, who'd thought she stood alone, unable to rely on anyone, was now depending on *her*. The hot emotions that bubbled up as a result were barely containable.

"Please, Lady Emilia."

In front of Emilia, who spoke not a word, Ram slowly bowed her head.

—Her pink eyes were moist from all the love packed into that tiny frame of hers.

"—Save him."

That quiet plea sent a tangible tremble through Emilia's entire being.

That feeling shot straight to her core, with enough impact to make her hands shake. She felt the heat conveyed by the blood coursing through her entire body.

And once those feelings had run their course, there was only one thing remaining within Emilia.

In her chest, a single sense of duty burned hot and bright—

"I'm not really sure how my becoming king is connected to saving Roswaal."

"

“Ah,” replied Ram, opening her mouth a little as she bowed. Somehow, the tension seemed to ebb—and her worry, too, judging from her lips, which trembled in relief.

Seeing Ram’s expression relaxing, Emilia felt a slight sense of satisfaction. At the same time, she thought it was very in character to see Ram refuse to cry despite her teary eyes.

And then, just as Emilia extended a hand to the kneeling Ram to help her back to her feet—

“—I hope you do not mind my fiiiinally speaking my own words of congratulations?”

“—!”

Feeling a tremble in the hand she touched, Emilia lifted her head toward the voice, which came from behind Ram—in the direction of the settlement. There, she saw a figure calmly standing on the grassy clearing.

The voice was familiar. Their demeanor was aloof. More importantly, it came from the individual who was the veritable center of their conversation—

“—Roswaal.”

And so with faint wariness in her chest, Emilia called out his name.

2

“It seems you were in the middle of conversing, but it feels like the matter came to an end… You do not mind?”

Addressed by his name, the person, who was none other than Roswaal L. Mathers, stepped forward toward them.

He was clothed in his usual eccentric attire, and for the first time in a while, he showed off the white makeup he often wore on his face. This was the Roswaal who Emilia knew—a far cry from the injured, bedridden patient she had seen of late.

“—That is far enough.”

“…Hmm.”

Emilia’s call brought Roswaal’s feet to a halt. It was not the hard emotions infused in her voice that forced him to a stop but the palm Emilia turned Roswaal’s way.

Emilia had drawn Ram close with her right hand, turning her left toward him. Of course, this was no simple bluff, something the surging mana Roswaal detected made plain.

“My, myyyy, is this not quite a harsh welcome? Even though, upon hearing Emilia had challenged the Trial, I came running over with this gravely injured body of miiiine.”

“I would dearly like to believe that is really what you think, but…”

Deflecting the truth with her words, Emilia narrowed her neat eyebrows.

By rights, Roswaal was Emilia’s chief ally and patron in the royal selection. He was also the savior who’d brought Emilia out of the glacier that used to be the Great Elior Forest, which she’d only just set eyes upon in the past revealed by the Trial—and the one who’d taught her it was possible to save her frozen kin.

It was this Roswaal of whom Emilia was wary—because she felt Ram’s palm tremble in her grip.

“Please do not make such a fearful face, Lady Emilia. Even I am genuinely concerned for you… Or perhaps I should say, I sympathize with you.”

“You sympathize with me…? What do you mean by that?”

“I mean what I said. I sympathize with you from the bottom of my heart—for this situation where you, knowing no way to be loved save through fulfilling the expectations of those around you, were inevitably forced to confront the past against your will.”

As he shook his head in disapproval, Roswaal’s declaration made Emilia open her eyes wide.

He spoke the word *sympathy* as if he pitied Emilia’s circumstances. However, the cold, melancholic emotions differed from simple sympathy— It was something bordering on malice.

“Allow me to formally convey my congratulations to you, along with sentiments of sympathy and pity— You have done well to overcome the Trial. I had truly thought it was beyond you.”

“…A compliment like that makes it hard to just come out and say thank you. Besides, I have not yet properly finished the Trial. I was told that there are two more.”

“Yes, I am aware of this. Besides, I am somewhat relieved—Naaaamely, that even an airhead like you is able to understand that my congratulations just now were not words of goodwill.”

Roswaal laced his words with sarcasm as he continued addressing Emilia, who was perplexed and unable to discern his intent.

His hostile emotions were complex, feeling like equal parts

lament and joy. But it was clear that his self-wounding and his self-mockery were just scratching the surface of his suffering.

"Roswaal, what did you come here for? Did you really come just to say this?"

"Mostly for that. Also, I wished to see for myself."

"*See*… You mean, the results of my Trial?"

Roswaal closed his eyes and pulled back his shoulders. In confirming the result of the Trial, perhaps he wished to see what answer Emilia had gleaned from confronting her past…or whether it had broken her heart once more.

"You said you thought I couldn't do it… Have you changed your opinion a little?"

"

“Master Roswaal!”

As Emilia’s voice caught in her throat, Ram loudly rebuked Roswaal in her stead.

Ram, having maintained her silence up to that point, stood at Emilia’s side as she powerfully slammed her pink emotions against her master. However, Roswaal ignored this, seemingly receiving them like a refreshing breeze, and continued speaking to Emilia.

“Those are borrowed words on a stage prepared for you. Even challenging the Trial here was a choice made possible by everyone’s goodwill… I find no fault with you. It is I, and the others around us, who desired that you do so. But though he understands this perfectly well, Subaru has forced such a cruel thing onto you.”

“That isn’t so! Subaru was just…”

“That is his way. After all, he merely shouted encouragement at you that was shorn of all logic and reason, did he not? He summoned all the emotional arguments he could, forcing his ideals onto you alone. I understand, I understand; indeed… After aaaaall, we are the same, he and I.”

“Subaru and you are the same? What is that supposed to mean?”

“In that we force our ideals upon the women we love.”

When he made this firm statement, Ram gripped Emilia’s hand harder with great force.

Understanding the feeling in her palm, Emilia looked straight back at Roswaal’s yellow eye. A listless smile continued to adorn the corners of his lips as Roswaal shook his head side to side.

“Just what did he say to you? Words that sounded comfortable to the ears, I am sure. You are soft, Lady Emilia, gently crumbling with ease, which makes you easy to handle as long as one remains polite. Truly, Lady Emilia is weak and fragile, someone embracing such forlorn hopes. You have considered what it would be like to live as a normal girl, I imagine? He has no interest in the real you, not in the slightest. What he loves is the ideal of you that rests within him—is that not so?”

Piling insidious words upon one another, Roswaal lowered his gaze, his eyes seeming desolate.

At first, his words appeared to intentionally insult and scorn, yet, for some reason, Emilia felt like the emotions he revealed were laments that cut into him instead.

Perhaps Roswaal himself could no longer clearly differentiate

between whether he was speaking about Subaru or about himself.

Even as his presence overwhelmed her, Emilia took a short breath.

Certainly, Roswaal was compelling enough to bowl most people over. But there was something that had to be said. More than anything else, he wasn't there to say it, so the trembling girl had to say it in his place.

"…That's all you have to say?"

"

acted like those parts of her didn't exist, but Subaru had understood. He'd seen right through her.

—To Emilia, now that she'd recovered her past, this was something to take deep, immeasurable joy in.

"Subaru saw me as I really am. And I thought, I don't want to show Subaru just my bad sides anymore. That's why you and Subaru are nothing alike."

If Subaru Natsuki was someone who couldn't accept anything less than the ideal Emilia, she'd probably still be in the tomb clutching her knees that very moment.

Even where Garfiel was concerned, she had no doubt that if Subaru, knowing things beyond his ideals, hadn't spoken of idealism, Garfiel would have never lent his ears to such words.

Subaru, knowing Emilia was weak, had told her he loved her nonetheless.

Subaru, knowing Garfiel was kind, had told him to change nonetheless.

Subaru came running to everyone whose feet stood still, scolding them, shoving their backs, making them run as well.

You can do it, he said. *You can fight*, he said— *You don't have time to stand still*, he said.

"When my memories returned, I was anxious. With Puck gone, I felt like I was being crushed… When I remembered everything, I felt like I wasn't myself anymore, like who I was up until now had been a lie."

What she believed in had been demolished, and as a result, she had ceased to move. Cowering in the face of such thoughts, the reason Emilia could stand there having confronted and overcome her past was—

"When you think you want to do something… When you *want* to change—there are people who will help you, who will give you a helping hand. He taught me there are people like that out there."

"Is that not merely a fraud? A fraud's act meant to convince you to stand once more so…"

"No, it's not a lie. It's not nonsense with no basis at all. Subaru said he believed in me. Those feelings will not become a lie… I won't let them be a lie. That is my answer."

Emilia boldly dismissed Roswaal's rebuttal.

She would never let the words that he…that Subaru had spoken to her when she was helpless and hapless be called a lie, a

nonexistent hope. She would not allow it.

The words Subaru Natsuki had firmly declared to Emilia—*I know you can do it*—were no lie. Emilia had broken out of her own shell, and by *doing it*, the lie had ceased to be.

It was what people called a *wish*…a wish that it would cease to be a lie. That was why—

"—I'll turn lies into wishes. Right now, that's what I want to do and what I *need* to do."

This was what Subaru had so earnestly, so desperately taught her.

Once, Emilia could not draw her answer out in a concrete form, but at that moment, she'd finally pieced it together.

—She would make this wish come true. That was what Emilia *had* to do.

"

His gaze was trained toward both of Emilia's eyes, as if trying to keep the keen emotions under his makeup, under his ornamental smile, from reaching his face. That was how she knew.

Roswaal's mental state was far too conflicted to decipher. He was wise, and Emilia felt he'd lived in a world utterly beyond her comprehension. But that instant, she realized something.

That perhaps the true reason that had caused Roswaal to come to this place might be—

"—Roswaal, could it be that you wanted to make me do something horrible?"

The possibility abruptly came to her mind. The instant she put it on her lips, she could think of no other reason.

Pushing himself to come while deeply wounded, intermingling words of congratulations with insults, speaking maliciously that he had expected nothing of her, and on top of that, mocking Subaru—it was one uncharacteristic behavior piled upon the next…

"It's like you want to make me angry so that I'll punish you."

"…Purely to get this out of the way, I happen to dislike pain."

"—? I would think everyone dislikes that?"

The reply tugged at Emilia's mind, making her incline her head, but he had not denied Emilia's words.

He wanted to be hurt, to be punished. Had Roswaal come to this place in hopes of that?

Even Emilia could understand such destructive impulses, despising oneself to the point of wanting to be put through the wringer. The only difference was whether one directed that inwardly or outwardly.

Emilia was the sort to direct it inwardly. Perhaps that was true of Roswaal as well?

"And so you have changed again— To me, this is exceedingly difficult to accept."

"Roswaal?"

"I respect your decision, and the will to walk forward is praiseworthy. I can comprehend how you discern there is hope after accepting your pain and wounds. That is why I sympathize with you."

Sympathize. Once more, Roswaal brought up the word he had begun his speech with to Emilia.

But Emilia thought she had already asserted that his sympathy was misplaced. There was no reason to view her as pitiable, for Emilia had already found hope.

Finding that hope fleeting, Roswaal shook his head side to side. After all—

"Even your virtuous decision to be hurt is already meaningless, for this is a finished world."

"*Finished world*…?"

"Properly speaking, this is a world approaching its end, perhaps? It is a world that has veered off its proper path, a world astray from its proper destination. This Sanctuary and the royal selection are already meaningless."

Slowly shaking his head again, Roswaal spoke those words, seemingly finding this acutely regrettable from the bottom of his own heart. Emilia could not conceal her bewilderment at the inconsistency between his demeanor and the emotions precipitating it.

Even though deep in his heart he still felt frustration, Roswaal was letting everything go.

"Roswaal…what are you trying to cast away? You…you and I started this together, right? Casting it aside midway…that's absolutely wrong!"

"—Then…what is it you wish to do?"

"I don't know! But wrong things are wrong! I don't understand what you're trying to give up on, Roswaal, but don't give up! That's too selfish of you, isn't it?!"

Knowing full well she sounded like she was lecturing a child, Emilia extended an accepting hand toward Roswaal. If Roswaal was going to try and let things go, she'd grab him and drag him back in his stead.

"There's no need to abandon anything— Not anymore."

"…You truly do speak like young Subaru."

As Emilia thrust her chest out, firmly declaring her beliefs, Roswaal sighed. From there, he let his shoulders droop, as if all energy had slipped out of him, and shifted his gaze to the tomb behind Emilia.

"Just how well can you change grandiose language into reality?"

"That's what I'm going to prove from here on out, in the tomb…no, even outside the Sanctuary."

Emilia was firmly declaring to Roswaal that she would challenge the second Trial. Then she shifted her gaze toward Ram, whose hand she had not let go of the entire time.

“Lady Emilia.”

Ram, having maintained her silence as she witnessed the pair’s replies to each other, addressed Emilia with trembling lips. Nodding to her call, Emilia gently let go of her hand, which had linked the two together.

“I’m going, Ram— Somehow, I *will* make your wish come true.”

“

Her consciousness blanked out, and Emilia had the powerful sense that her soul was being shorn from her body, whisking her off to a place in the yonder.

"Subaru…"

Not even certain what her own lips had spoken at the very end, Emilia knew the second Trial had begun.

3

Having watched Emilia enter the tomb, Roswaal and Ram were left alone on the grassy clearing.

Ram gently pressed her left hand, which Emilia had held, against her chest.

"…Rather unexpectedly, her resolve seems to be extremely hiiiigh. Subaru is indeed a formidable foe."

As Ram did so, Roswaal, having also watched Emilia leave from a short distance away, murmured thus. There was little emotion infused in his tone of voice. He did not seem to be particularly disappointed by what he had spoken.

In fact, Ram was certain of it. Roswaal did not have the heartfelt interest shown by his demeanor just moments before. The proof was how Roswaal was completely unruffled by a result that was surely contrary to his will.

"I am sorry to have put all that goodwill you painstakingly built to waste. To not launch her own outburst after enduring so much vitriol… She truly is weak to the bitter end."

"…Master Roswaal, from what point did you observe Ram and Lady Emilia's conversation?"

"I had some rather sharp words with young Subaru and the others, you see. I wanted to see Lady Emilia's state for myself…and so I saw you bending your knee before her— You are quite the actress yourself."

Roswaal seemed quite impressed when he replied to Ram's question. In other words, Roswaal had seen Ram give her respects to Emilia and ask for her one, precious wish to be granted.

And having seen it and engaged in his exchanges with Emilia as a result, he was now thanking Ram for her efforts.

"Had Lady Emilia given in to provocation and attempted to inflict harm upon me, victory or defeat in the contest would have been determined in short order…but perhaps the circumstances

seemed somewhat too favorable?”

He’d meant to stimulate Emilia’s anger and turn it toward him.

Emilia had interpreted it as a desire for her to hurt him. In that, she had been correct. Where Emilia was wrong was that he did not desire this because he wished to receive his punishment.

—Roswaal merely wanted to do his utmost to fulfill what was recorded in his magic tome.

The royal selection existed for that purpose. The Sanctuary existed for that purpose. *He* existed for that purpose.

Garfiel’s grief, Ryuzu’s and Shima’s long-standing desires, Frederica’s devotion, Subaru’s melancholy, Emilia’s sense of guilt, even Ram’s feelings—these were all things he used to accomplish the magic tome’s desired result.

“Young Subaru and the others head toward the mansion, leaving this Sanctuary to Lady Emilia. At a glance, this action appears skillful, but it is a poor move. Seeing nothing but what one wishes to see is a habit anyone would term a vice. It is not one I would wish for young Subaru to acquire.”

“What do you mean by this?”

“I did not expect that Garfiel would join Subaru’s side. But this also means his removal from the Sanctuary side of the board. If his troublesome eyes are closed, I will draw nearer to my objective in a way that hasn’t been possible until now.”

“

“Master Roswaal, what do you intend to do from here?”

“What I seek has not changed from before. I merely need overexert myself a trifle.”

“Ram will…”

“—You should wait here for Lady Emilia to return. After aaaall, even I will feel pangs in my chest if that valiant girl arrives with no one to greet her.”

From the faint lowering of the corners of his eyes, his statement was not one of sarcasm but of consideration toward Emilia.

Even as he schemed to ruin Emilia’s efforts, he acted with warped concern for her heart. It was not limited to Emilia; the same applied to Subaru, to Garfiel, and to everyone else.

Hence, Ram bowed to Roswaal, the only one to whom she had opened her heart, and watched him go. Roswaal slipped out of the grassy clearing, not toward the settlement but toward the forest.

She watched him with her pink eyes until he was no longer in view, after which Ram gently closed them.

And then—

4

—And then, relying on the scenery displayed within those closed eyes, Ram arrived at a certain place.

It was a building that maintained an abnormal white color, with a foul stench that repelled visitors. It was the Witch’s laboratory, lurking in the deepest part of the forest, at the end of a path unworthy of the name—a place she had been told of several times, yet had never reached.

And so Ram stepped into that place, one to which she had never been invited.

“

was immediately made known to the devil. The devil at the entrance to the room looked upon Ram with a questioning air and a faint whiff of bewilderment dwelling in his differently colored eyes.

Ram was keenly aware that this rare reaction from him made her chest leap with a sense of maidenly exultation.

The secret art of Clairvoyance, passed down among the Oni, did not function unless the wavelengths of the caster and the target were compatible. Naturally, if Ram exerted herself, she could match her own wavelength even to that of demon beasts, but it was a different story where a high-rank opponent was concerned. If such an opponent closed his heart, synchronization was utterly impossible.

In other words, had Roswaal not truly opened his heart to her, Clairvoyance could not function upon him. In point of fact, Ram had not attempted to overlap her own vision with that of Roswaal's even once to this point.

And so she had finally arrived at this place—really, how could she fail to feel joy?

"I believe I asked you to wait for Lady Emilia?"

"Yes, you did."

"Then I bid you: For what puuuurpose have you come to this place?"

"—That is very simple."

When asked, she suppressed the passion that made her heart beat loudly, replying with her expression still neutral and tranquil.

Ram's pink hair swayed as she drew her wand from under the hem of her skirt. It was her beloved wand, granted to her by Roswaal personally when she had only just begun to serve him— It was a magic wand employing Ram's own, broken-off horn.

Twirling it within her hand, she thrust its tip toward her beloved master—

"—I have come to rob you of your obsession with the Witch."

To the man she cared for, who was mad with love, she confessed her own love, hoping to sear it into him.

5

—Ram had gone along with the gamble because she viewed it as her best opportunity to fulfill her own wish.

“—Greetings, Miss Ram. The wind is serene tonight. A fine night, isn’t it?”

When a certain man addressed Ram, it was the night before Emilia overcame the Trial of the tomb, the night before Garfiel broke through his ten years of stagnation, the night before Subaru trembled from the humiliation of having his verses of love read by undesired parties, and the night before Ram placed her wager for her own long-standing desire—in other words, it was the previous night.

“

Having meant to assert that the initiative rested with her, Ram caught her breath a little. That was how easily the young man—how easily Otto had nonchalantly crept into her flank.

When she glanced over, Otto was smiling as he keenly scrutinized Ram with his gaze. Ram grasped that this, in contrast to his frivolous expression, constituted his true worth as a traveling merchant.

"You seem to be quite a fraudster."

"I am merely a man midway through chasing a dream. Perhaps that is why I get along with Mr. Natsuki and his reckless pursuits. Errr, I have digressed."

"Ha! Bald-faced liar. Also, you have set your hopes in the wrong place. Ram's desires align with Master Roswaal's wishes. How did you come to believe I would lend Barusu a hand?"

"I trust you are well aware that where the destination of his wishes is concerned, the flow of events has already strayed from the marquis's desires? I believe Mr. Natsuki has spoken to you of this as well."

Otto had approached Ram once he was certain beyond a set extent.

Feeling that this was an unamusing fact, Ram slid one hand down to her thigh. The wand holstered there under her skirt was her beloved weapon for the employment of magic.

Even as she thought it was overkill against the likes of Otto, the means to instantly overwhelm him was a precious treasure indeed.

"As I see it, this seems to be my time to excel."

"Your what?"

Seeing Otto twitch a cheek and moisten his lips with his tongue, Ram raised an eyebrow toward him.

"This is a critical moment, or something along those lines. It's nothing to brag about, but my winning percentage for excelling is rather good."

"Such exaggerated confidence. I wonder, do you truly think such confidence is enough to seduce Ram to your will?"

She had no ears to lend to half-hearted invitations. Compared with how she was previously, Otto could only think that Ram's position had also grown precarious… This was a veritable critical juncture indeed.

If he could at least "excel" properly, then perhaps—

"For whatever reason, Mr. Natsuki does not think of Miss Ram

as an enemy, come what may— If he is correct, I believe we should cooperate with Miss Ram's own true desires."

"—. What a pity."

"Eh?"

Otto had an idiotic look on his face as Ram sighed deeply, sliding her hand up from her thigh. Then she used that same hand she had drawn back to gently stroke her own hair.

"I said, what a pity— Please go into detail."

Even if she listened to his explanation to the end, it would still not be too late to decide whether to use her wand or not.

At the very least, Otto offering negotiations was not a bad thing. Yes, she would humor him with a show of acceptance.

—And so in response to Ram's urging, Otto proceeded to explain in detail.

"—So what do you think of all this?"

"Are you an idiot?"

Ram was declaring that her eyes beheld an idiot, and the word one should turn upon an idiot was *idiot* itself.

It was only natural she had the urge to say that. After all, Otto's explanation was no summary or outline but closer to divulging every last card in his group's hand. In other words, he'd exposed their entire scheme to her.

"Do you lack the imagination to grasp what would happen if Ram told Master Roswaal all this…?"

"If you must put it that way, I can imagine nothing good. However, I am a merchant, so I must spare no effort required to succeed where business is concerned— Were failure to result from cold feet, I would bring shame to the House of Suwen, you see."

Otto was stuffily asserting that he could not bring shame to his family. Such determination could not reach Ram's heart, as she already had no family of her own—at least, it should not have.

"Miss Ram?"

"—. Nothing at all. More importantly, at the beginning, you behaved as if you approached me in Barusu's service…but this is your own decision, isn't it? At the very least, you have not spoken to Barusu where Garf is concerned."

"Ah, er…you really could tell, couldn't you?"

"I do not think Barusu would approve such recklessness. Ram also views this as an extremely stupid thing to attempt alone—

enough that calling it a personality flaw does not seem to do it justice."

Of course, Subaru and Otto's plan incorporated countermeasures against Garfiel. And the radical contents thereof required the drafter of that plan to exhaust himself right to death's door, casting such a precarious net that only a thin ray of hope could be seen.

"It truly is a personality flaw. Not that I would say this to anyone, but the planner is absolutely not cut out to be a merchant."

"Do you really intend to hide such a thing when you are looking straight into my eyes like this?!"

Male pride or something of the sort. How trivial, Ram thought disdainfully with a snort.

However, setting aside Otto's concealed determination, the plan was not a bad one. The elements of the gamble were not few—yet, it was far more forward-looking than waiting for inevitable defeat, wasn't it? Accordingly…

"—If Ram is to cooperate with you, there are three conditions."

Ram held up three fingers as she spoke. Otto hardened his expression as he nodded deeply.

"I am listening."

"First, Garf. Giving him a knuckle sandwich is just fine. Ram enthusiastically concurs where it comes to breaking the bridge of Garf's nose— However, after the bridge of his nose is broken, you are to leave him to Ram."

"As I hope you will play a large role where Garfiel is concerned, those words sound quite ominous…"

"That depends on Garf."

She was not particularly concerned. She'd known Garfiel for nearly a decade. So long as he was the same as he'd always been, it was highly unlikely she would be the one to yield…though it was still stupid.

"After that, Lady Emilia. I cannot bear seeing Lady Emilia so haggard now that she has lost the Great Spirit. Tell Barusu he needs to do something— It may be outside of Master Roswaal's intentions, but even so, if we are to move forward, having Lady Emilia get back to her feet is unavoidable, whether I like it or not."

"This time, it is up to Mr. Natsuki and Lady Emilia where that is concerned, yes? Well, it might be the most up-in-the-air portion, but this plan does hinge on the premise that it will work out in the

end.”

Otto scratched his pathetic face in response to Ram’s statements.

Just as he himself was aware, the basis of the plan put exceptionally heavy emphasis on what was expected out of Subaru and Emilia’s relationship. It was a plan built on the premise and the belief that there was something tangible between them.

Emotions included, it was a plan largely reliant on logic, yet that specific part rested on emotional hopes in particular.

“Either way, I expect you to accept these two conditions. As they are necessary and the minimum conditions for the success of your plan, it is not particularly a hindrance to you, I trust?”

“I suppose not. Put bluntly, I had considered it possible you would propose far more difficult and less achievable things… Ah, er, ummm, I imagine the third is quite something, so I should be quiet and wait before saying such things.”

“What a fool.”

She could understand Otto’s wariness. But his concerns were needless.

Certainly, there was no mistaking that Ram was hopping on board the plan for her own objectives. But that was something Otto, who had proposed as much, had no doubt already woven into his schemes.

It was only natural that Garfiel, Emilia, and after them, Subaru and Otto would fight valiantly. It was a good thing for Ram to cooperate to a lesser or greater extent. But Ram would yield the final scene to no one else.

Therefore, the final condition Ram sought from Otto was a simple one.

And that was—

“—You will not speak one word to Barusu about why Ram wishes to join his wager.”

6

And having arrived at the final scene of the plan she had joined, Ram stood across from Roswaal.

The place was the facility covertly placed in the forest—the place that appeared in Shima’s story of the past, and in one sense,

the place that served, along with the tomb, as the central pillar of the Sanctuary.

The hovering stench and the abnormally white walls threw portions of her five senses into chaos. However, it was not a problem.

For the man who stood in front of Ram's eyes had robbed Ram of her consciousness, down to the furthest corners of her soul, long, long before.

"Obsession, you saaaaay."

Roswaal murmured in a low voice. He said it both to repeat the claim Ram had spoken aloud and to classify the objective for which she herself had appeared in this place.

That very instant, Roswaal browsed through a variety of possibilities in his mind. Most of them were widely at variance with the truth. Then he came across the possibility he thought most likely.

"I think this is unlikely, yet…could it be you are truly minded to turn your wand against me?"

Raising his eyebrows in apparent surprise, Roswaal had come to a single conclusion about Ram's behavior. By stripping away all the clearly wrong ways to take her words, he had finally arrived at the proper answer.

When he asked her this, Ram stood straighter, which made Roswaal's shoulders sag.

"I see. It has been years since you have turned your wand upon me…but for that time to come now is unfortunate. It also pains me that someone who knows my feelings, and my objective, would call them an obsession…"

"I may not have said it aloud, but I have always thought so. It is only natural."

"Natural… Weeeell, I suppose it is, given your long, long days of humiliating submission."

Even as he slumped his shoulders, Roswaal beheld Ram, who stood resolutely, with his two-colored eyes. From there, he gently ran his fingers through his indigo hair.

"Seeing nothing save that which you wish to see… How truly ironic that I appraised this to be young Subaru's vice, when it occurs right under my own nose. I had thought your actions an expression of devotion in your own way."

"Giving Garf a knuckle sandwich was both for the sake of Ram's

objective and for setting Garf's stupidity straight… What is it you intended to do to that group without Ram?"

"I cannot deny the sense that you plaaaayed them very well as a result. For this final contest, young Subaru elected to gamble and cast out his net— I do not trifle with such gambling."

He spoke as if Subaru's decision was ironic, whereas his own thoughts were logical.

In point of fact, she agreed with Roswaal's opinion not once but a hundred times over. Many of Subaru's actions were haphazard, and Otto's plan merely had the heaven-sent fortune of including Ram's cooperation on its side.

Ram's assessment of Subaru was unchanged: He was a man with good timing, and that was all.

"But having good timing alone is Barusu's sole redeeming feature. I was not mistaken in wagering on that single redeeming feature— You have the book, I take it?"

"

commitment to destroying his wish.

This was the vow sworn between Ram and Roswaal, undiluted in the nine years since its forging—

“So the time has come, then. Certainly, the flow of this world goes astray of my desired path. And thus, the vow comes into force…meaning that I, having lost my desire, am to offer myself to you as promised.”

Roswaal was resolved to offer up the entirety of his very long life in order to arrive at the result recorded within the magic tome —so much that, if he should fail, living would lose all meaning.

“If I was to become a hollow shell, you may do with me as you please. Such I did promise, yes?”

“Whether you live or die is up to Ram.”

“Yes, that was it… After the passage of nearly ten years, you might finally fulfill your retribution.”

Reconfirming the vow he could not possibly have forgotten, Roswaal drew a black book out from his pocket. Setting eyes upon the black-bound book, Ram knew with one glance that this was the abominable book of prophecy.

This was the book of knowledge, the continued pursuit that was Roswaal’s very reason to go on. It was the magic tome she had sworn to destroy long ago.

“To you, this must have been a long, long, bitter time, I imagine.”

“

Her vow with Roswaal was necessary in order to live thereafter.

This was something that "—" never knew and something that Ram never told "—".

"—?"

Ram narrowed her eyes, feeling disquiet over the throb in her mind and the gap in her memories.

It was like a strange form of amnesia, like losing a memory she'd had until a short time before. She felt like she'd lost something she could not afford to, but Ram glossed over the feeling, acting like nothing had happened by sheer force of will.

"Covering your vengeful heart with a shell of loyalty, you hid the flames of retribution that you nurtured within you while you served me. Even so, there was no more excellent pawn than you. Until now, even within this Sanctuary, just how precious a treasure have you been?"

Roswaal continued his soliloquy, even as Ram prayed for the ill feeling from her memories to go away.

Many of his words were praise. Understanding the true intentions Ram had long kept hidden, he was giving faint praise for overcoming a number of tribulations to arrive at this point for the sake of fulfilling her desire.

This was a very warped form of love.

It was the love with which one celebrated a child advancing in days and months, reaching out as her desire was about to be granted.

But—

"—And that makes it more the pity. Your decision is but a tiny trifle, premature."

In the span of a single instant, the sentiments of praise infusing his voice turned to disappointment.

A smile came over Roswaal as he shook his head side to side, grimacing at Ram as she gripped her wand.

"You have done well to create an opportunity where I am compelled to have the book of knowledge on my person. If Garfiel ceased his obsession with the Sanctuary, if Lady Emilia ceased relying solely on young Subaru, whatever the result, there would be no way to preserve that which has been written except for me to move personally."

One by one, the conditions required for the fulfillment of what was written had been abolished. The problematic knots that had

prevented the liberation of the Sanctuary had been untied one after another. The pawns who served him were gone.

"Though, I suppose saying *resolved*, rather than *abolished*, better reflects the depth of your feelings."

"The simplest means is usually the poorest. Ram does not care for losing wagers, either, you see."

"This time, are not the nets cast by your hand rather nuuuumerous? Of course, it is worthy of praise that your Clairvoyance ability enabled you to tail even me. That was splendidly done. However."

Cutting off his words at that point, Roswaal closed one eye, the gaze of his yellow eye shooting right through Ram.

"You should have let me do what I have come here to accomplish and could have accomplished with but one more step. That alone is a pity."

Spreading his hands wide and still holding the book in his right, Roswaal turned his attention to that which stood behind him.

In the deepest part of the facility, a cavity was formed out of the white walls, and from this concealed room trickled out a blue light. Squinting to follow the light to its source, Ram saw an unusually large crystal enter her field of vision—no, a magic crystal, within which a young girl was sealed.

—This was Ryuzu Meyer, the true identity of Sanctuary as Shima had explained it.

"This is the commendable girl who offered up her body for the sake of her friend, becoming the core of the Sanctuary. But this instant, she is not my objective. What I require is this magic crystal."

"You intend to use the magic crystal as a catalyst to employ Great Magic?"

"Enough to alter the weather, yes— Earlier, I said this world had gone astray from my intentions, but that is not quite precise. The most critical part yet remains. It is in this sense that you were…overeager."

"…I thought events had strayed from the ones written in the book of knowledge?"

"Quite a bit, yes. However, that is not so for the ending. One cannot speak of success or failure until what is written in the book for the Sanctuary arrives at its conclusion— If snow should fall here, what shall become of the Sanctuary? What is its future?"

In accordance with the book of knowledge, Roswaal would make snow fall on the Sanctuary. He had come for the magic crystal to employ it as a magic catalyst. And to employ that spell—

"—Requires an enormous amount of concentration and the very deft use of mana. That instant, you would have been able to achieve your retribution with certainty. Even without your horn, had you attacked by surprise, my wounds are deep and my trust great enough to slow my reactions… You would most certainly have struck me down."

"…I did not, for to do so would be meaningless."

"—? In the sense that you wish to conquer me when I am whole? Or that you wish to destroy me without a single second to spare? I can somewhat understand such feelings, but…"

"No. I was right… You truly understand nothing, do you?"

Ram's reply left a genuinely questioning look all over Roswaal's face. That fact made Ram close her eyes.

"

“—Then what purpose could you seek to accomplish, I wooonder?”

Giving the raised book a light toss, Roswaal caught it with his opposite hand and theatrically stuffed it into his pocket. Flickering flames floated up from his pair of empty palms.

Red, blue, green—Roswaal narrowed both his eyes as he showed her flames of one color after the next.

At the tip of Roswaal’s gaze, Ram infused power into the wand she held in her hand, sliding her empty, opposite hand into her maid outfit. And then—

“Ram has no chance of victory. That much is clear. However—”

“—If it is two against one, perhaps the advantage is ours?”

“

wrought via Ram's schemes.

"—Come."

"As you wish."

—The bewitching, colored flames blazed higher as colorless blades of wind flew with wild abandon, and the world was plunged into explosively freezing cold.

In that one instant, shock waves spread across the Sanctuary, and a macabre dance began between Oni, devil, and spirit.

CHAPTER 7

A HOWLING REUNION

1

—Keeping her breath low in the darkness, Petra did her best to suppress everything from her body that could be defined as sound.

She made her small body even smaller, mindful even of the crinkle of clothing rubbing against air. She walked with her hand over her mouth, for if she did not, her breaths, more chaotic than she could remember, would make a sound from her throat.

She nearly wished she could stop her heart so that its noisy thumping might pause for a minute.

"—!"

Petra's light-brown hair swayed as she walked unsteadily in the mansion, which she had begun to get used to, almost like she was lost in an unfamiliar world. She was glad that the floor had a soft carpet over it. Thanks to that, she was spared from having her trembling toes hitting the floor. She vowed to gratefully wash the carpet the next time she had a chance.

Were it not for such silly thoughts, her legs would have stopped obeying her completely. As it was, her tottering gait was slower than that of a baby. If she stopped, she likely would never walk forward again.

She was in a long corridor with no end to it. This one time, she was tempted to hate the vastness of this large mansion she had grown so fond of.

—How, and why, had things turned out that way?

Until a few brief hours before, the mansion was an ideal workplace to Petra. She'd been in awe of the mansion to begin with, and the maid outfits were cute and wonderful, too. Frederica, the

one instructing her, was kind, and the mansion was connected to someone she was faintly fond of. It was perfect.

That perfect world, enveloped by admiration and dreams, was now so frightening that it nearly froze Petra's heart.

The night when everything changed had been just like the previous day until darkness fell.

After the evening meal, she'd tried to bring Beatrice's untouched meal to her; wiped down the girl named Rem, who continued to sleep in her room; and went to Frederica's own quarters to hear her assessment of that day's work. After that, she bathed, returned to her own assigned personal room, and slept in preparation for the next—

"—Petra, please wake up. Petra."

"…Miss Frederica?"

Feeling that someone was shaking her body and hearing a voice speaking to her, Petra gently awoke in the middle of the night. When she looked over, Frederica was in uniform, standing by the bed, which made Petra blink her round eyes wide in surprise.

It was not surprise that she had been awoken at that hour. Rather, it was the obvious tension that Frederica exuded.

She remembered that sensation. It was an aura that Petra had felt several times some months ago—

"Miss!!"

Immediately wiping away her drowsiness, Petra jumped right out of the bed. Frederica was a little surprised by the sight, but when Petra, grasping the situation, leaped into her arms, she gently held the girl.

Then she stroked Petra's head with her free hand.

"Petra, listen closely— Head outside through the dining hall's kitchen door. Do it quietly, without a sound, but as quickly as you can. You can do it, yes?"

"I can do it… But, Miss Frederica, what about you?"

"I will follow soon enough. Once you are outside the mansion, run as far as the village. Once I meet up with you safe and sound, how about I let you sleep in a little tomorrow?"

Speaking as if making a very slight joke, Frederica let Petra go. Petra was still smiling at Frederica as she felt a tangible sense of tension spread across her entire body.

Something—something was happening at the mansion. And Petra was helpless to do anything about it.

“Petra.”

With that brief call serving as a signal, the pair left the room.

The night sky was covered with clouds, and the mansion was submerged in darkness beyond moonlight’s reach. Faced with the gloom of the unlit corridor, Frederica squinted, and Petra gently followed behind her. When Frederica narrowed her jade eyes and caught her breath, Petra simultaneously broke into a run in the opposite direction.

“Dining hall… Dining hall…!”

She repeatedly murmured to herself what Frederica had told her. The dining hall was on the first floor of the main wing. Fortunately, by going straight down that particular passage, she would immediately reach it. She’d already memorized the interior of the mansion. Even in the dark, it was an easy win.

But just as she reached the passage that stretched from the east wing to the main wing, Petra came right to a halt. If she raced to the main wing, she could rush straight to the dining hall’s kitchen door. Frederica’s instructions were to flee as far as the village from there. However—

“—Miss Rem is…”

The Sleeping Princess remained in the mansion, lying on her bed on the floor above.

The passage was right next to her. Petra hesitated as she stared at the landing of the stairs below. She felt fear as her instincts begged her to do as Frederica told her.

But Subaru had entrusted Rem to Petra. The forlorn look with which Subaru had stared at the side of her sleeping face was seared into Petra’s eyes.

If Petra escaped alone then and there, what would become of her promise to Subaru?

“—!”

Tightly gritting her teeth, Petra roused her timid heart and put a foot on the stairs—toward the floor above, where Rem’s room was located.

She revered Frederica. Going against her instructions left Petra riddled with guilt. She was afraid, too. But with the mansion feeling so dangerous, she couldn’t leave Rem and run.

It was just like during the forest with the demon beasts— Back then, Subaru hadn’t abandoned Petra.

“I’m stupid… Really stupid…”

Her reminiscence at an end, Petra slipped back into her initial melancholy, letting a sound of weakness out as she seemed ready to break into tears.

Her heart was noisy. Her steps advanced slowly. Frederica would be angry. Her emotions were a jumbled mess.

“Agh, darn it… I already have this cute face going for me, so why do I need to do something this stupid…?!! But, but, but…!”

She was scared, she wanted to cry, she wanted to yell. But she did not. She could not.

After all, Subaru didn’t. He wouldn’t. Even if he was afraid and wanted to break down and cry, he wouldn’t.

“I mean, this is absolutely what Subaru would do… That’s why — That’s why for Subaru, for him only, I have to look good even if it kills me…!”

When her fear became nearly unbearable, Petra whispered to herself to bolster her spirits.

In that dark corridor, she caught sight of her destination, Rem’s room. It was a mere eleven yards away, enough to make her heart leap out and run to it. However, her feet could not catch up to her heart’s unrest.

Just a few more steps, just a few more feet, just two bedroom doors ahead—

—*I’ve arrived*, thought Petra, lifting her head.

That instant, beyond one of the corridor’s windows, the wind blew, moving a cloud covering the moon, and silver light shone into the corridor. Color returned to the world that had been nothing but darkness. Narrowing her dazzled eyes, Petra saw—.

“—Oh my, what a pretty young girl.”

A woman in black stood right before her, seemingly blended into the darkness.

“—Ah.”

There was a woman standing between her and the door to the room, which was a mere three steps away.

She had glossy black hair that was tied in a triple braid and a pitch-black outfit that accentuated her voluptuous physique. Even Petra could detect the scent of sensual charm wafting around her, and the vile knife she held in her right hand was eerily distinctive—

“According to what I was told, there are two targets and one bonus target. You would be the small maid, yes?”

“

“Are you shaking? It’s all right—I am certain that your innards will prove very pretty indeed.”

She couldn’t understand what the woman was saying.

She just understood that the approaching footsteps of this smiling stranger were synonymous with the footsteps of death. Even though she understood this, Petra’s legs were held in place by fear, unable to move, even though the vile weapon unsuited to the woman’s slender arm was about to cut away her life without any fanfare.

“Good girl… I will introduce you to an angel.”

Heartlessly, the woman raised the knife toward the trembling girl.

The blade sliced through the wind, aimed to mercilessly bite into Petra’s torso. Then—

“Petra—!!”

Crashing through the corridor window, a shadow filled the space between Petra and the knife. A high-pitched noise echoed, and the sound of metal grazing metal was accompanied by flying sparks and a shock wave that threw Petra onto the floor.

She was showered in blond hair right before her. A back she had looked up at many times over had shielded Petra from the wicked-looking blade. Petra instantly recognized that back, much broader than her mother’s. It could have belonged to only one person.

“Miss Frederica!”

“You’ve been a bad girl, Petra. I distinctly told you to flee. I will punish you later.”

“Yes! Yes!!”

Leaving Petra behind her, Frederica confirmed her safety with a glance as she spoke sternly. That kind strictness made Petra reply multiple times in a tearful voice.

Watching the exchange between the pair after her knife had been deflected, the woman contorted her glossy lips.

“Marvelous. You must be the large maid. I am so happy to see both maids together and getting along so well. I must line up both your bowels side by side and compare to see how your innards complement each other.”

“I cannot make heads or tails of such taste. I cannot even dignify calling it a hobby.”

After listening to the woman’s disturbing threat, Frederica

replied sharply as she thrust both her arms out.

Her arms made a creaking sound, one that grew progressively more extreme as her skeletal structure shifted. Her pretty nails changed to bestial claws, and golden fur sprouted from the skin of her arms up to the elbows.

“Demi-human blood? If you transform, do the contents of your belly differ from when you’re in your usual form? Or are they the same?”

“I have never been curious enough to find out for myself.”

“Is that so? In that case, can I ask you to show me after I slice you open? All you need to do is transform back when you’re on the verge of death.”

“You certainly are confident…”

Even though Frederica’s two arms had turned into deadly natural weapons, the assailant showed not the slightest concern. When her attitude was pointed out to her, the woman said, “I suppose so,” tilting her head slightly. “A little while ago, I had a near-death experience in the capital, so I improved my skills. You cannot match me.”

“…I feel like holding a grudge against whoever didn’t finish you when they had the chance.”

Frederica’s sense of duty and the crazed ghastliness leaking out of the woman—these would not determine victory or defeat, but even to Petra, it was clear that one was head and shoulders above the other.

“Petra, this time, head straight out of the mansion— Use the evacuation tunnel.”

“B-but, Miss…!”

Her voice catching, Petra looked toward the door of the room that was so very close. Inside was the reason Petra had been so reckless. Frederica could guess what it was from that glance alone. Accordingly…

“I do not know who hired you to do this, but it seems that Petra and I are your targets.”

“Yes. Two maids and one spirit girl. I was a little disappointed about the numbers, but I have high hopes for opening a spirit’s belly. Last time, I fell one small step short, you see.”

“

conversation, Frederica had learned the woman's objective straight from her lips—Rem wasn't among the woman's targets. The Sleeping Princess had vanished from the enemy's memory as well.

"Go!"

"Yes!!"

A moment after they signaled their mutual understanding, Frederica's voice sent Petra running off to her rear. Simultaneously, she turned her back to the fleeing girl as the attacker flipped her body and threw something. A total of four silvery iron skewers, glimmering in the moonlight, raced toward Petra in an attempt to snipe her legs.

"Your stubbornness is worse than your taste!"

With a single swing of her mighty arm, Frederica struck down all the iron skewers with a bestial claw. During that time, Petra did not look back even once. She raced down the corridor, placing the entirety of her trust in Frederica.

"Such a good girl."

"She's my pride!!"

The woman's obscene voice and Frederica's howl echoed throughout the mansion along with a sound of clashing steel. Frederica collided with the woman, beginning a deadly battle with her life on the line.

"Hagh!! Hagh!! Haaagh!!"

Petra's breath was ragged as she raced through the corridor, practically flying down the stairs.

A chain of high-pitched echoes rang out, and a tremor reached her from the corridor being destroyed. Frederica had judged that her opponent was superior to her. She was fighting valiantly so that Petra might escape.

She had already failed once. Frederica had told her to flee down the evacuation tunnel if all else failed. If she did as told and fled—If she fled, Frederica would die.

The instant she thought that, a single possibility floated into the back of Petra's mind.

"—Lady Beatrice could…"

If it was the final person remaining in the mansion, who she'd heard was a supernatural being…

"Here…! Maybe over here?!"

Running along the downstairs corridor, Petra flung open whichever door she put her hands on.

She'd heard that the power of Beatrice's spell made it possible to move from room to room within the mansion. Even when searching for her with Subaru, even when trying to bring her dinner, she'd never found the girl, but she was definitely there.

That moment, what Petra needed was a magic user of great power.

If Beatrice was around, Frederica could probably be saved. Petra could protect the mansion and her promise…

"She's not here… She's not anywhere here. Miss…!"

Out of breath, ready to collapse any moment, Petra let her tears flow. She'd opened every single door on that floor in the west wing. And yet, Beatrice was not there. The battle was still raging.

Petra had to find her soon, so very soon. If she didn't, Frederica would…

"Miss Frederica…!"

Even though she had to keep running, strength drained from Petra's feet little by little.

Using her hands, which were shaking so hard that she could not clench them into fists, she struck her own legs over and over. She needed to rouse her battered spirit and continue the search for Beatrice. And yet, her courage was insufficient. Her tears kept flowing.

"—Subaruuu!"

When her weakness slipped out, Petra spoke a single boy's name, as if clinging to it for dear life.

To Petra, this was the name of the bravest person in the whole world.

He was someone with incredible courage, who forced his trembling legs to face an opponent he knew he could not defeat.

When Petra and the others from the village were truly in danger, when they really might have died, he was the one who'd rushed off first and saved them—and so she called his name.

Even though, in that moment, she understood he wasn't there to save her.

"Subaru, Subaru… Save me, Subaruuu!"

"You got it. Sure thing, Petra."

"—Eh?"

Covering her face with her hands, Petra was trying to stop her tears when she unwittingly held her breath.

Between her fingers, in her teary, hazy vision, there was

someone right in front of her. This person was kneeling to match heights with Petra, who was crouching, meeting her at eye level.

"Sorry I'm late. But I'm here to help… I'm glad you're safe, Petra."

The person, who had a face with a familiar foul look, shot her a reassuring smile. As much as he tried to be considerate, his expression was not gentle in the slightest—which was why it relieved Petra to the very bottom of her heart.

"Is that you, Subaru…? You came?"

"It's me, and I came. I'm back safe and sound, all thanks to your charm, Petra."

Nodding, Subaru lifted up his right hand—showing the white handkerchief tied around his wrist. It was pretty dirty, but it was the same charm Petra had entrusted to Subaru on the day he had departed.

It was neither a hallucination nor a dream. Subaru had come back. When Petra reached out to touch his cheek, he gently guided her hand to his face and rubbed her back.

His touch calmed her heart. She wanted to gently let her consciousness yield to the relief. But she could not—not yet.

"Subaru, Miss Frederica is on the floor… There's a scary person in black with a really big knife…"

"A scary person in black with a big knife. Yeah, got it."

This fragmentary explanation of her features left Subaru nodding like he understood everything. Both understood the gravity of the situation. Within Subaru's arms, Petra desperately pointed toward the ceiling.

"Please save Miss Frederica! Subaru, get that woman!!"

"All right, leave it to me!! …That's what I'd like to say, but if I go up against someone Frederica can't beat, I'll be a corpse in one second!!"

"—!"

"—Which is why I brought superstrong reinforcements to help me out."

When Petra was momentarily at a loss for words, Subaru stroked her head as a smile crossed his foul-looking face. From there, he turned his gaze upward, and as feelings of relief and worry mixed together in his black eyes…

"Lot of uninvited guests in the way of tonight's dramatic reunion scene, though…"

2

It was too crude a battle to be called a duel to the death.

"—Shiii!"

Waving her right arm around, she repeatedly slammed through the opening created by one of the iron-skewer attacks. The woman swung her body up and down, left and right, leisurely evading the flurry of attacks with the elegance of a leaf swaying in the wind. When she leaped back to evade the black blade that had appeared, iron skewers flew at her in midair, giving her no chance to evade them.

Frederica's arm, wrapped in thick fur and muscle, was easily penetrated by the sharp iron skewers. Gritting her teeth at the pain, which felt like she had just been burned, Frederica swung her arm, sending the iron skewers flying.

It was not a fatal blow. Still, her wounds were gradually increasing, and her endurance was being whittled away. Compared with Frederica's labored breathing, the woman with the long, swaying triple braids was not even slightly out of breath.

The difference in their fighting strength was crystal clear. The fact that Frederica was still alive simply meant her opponent wasn't being serious, and—

"—What is this compulsion of yours to aim only below my breasts?"

"If you must ask, it's my hobby, or perhaps, I should call it my way of life. I am the Bowel Hunter, after all. Spilling your innards is my creed."

She had not spoken in jest. She was completely serious, something that made Frederica's body shudder. This was no joke. The woman was serious. Nor was her calling this abnormality *her creed* a lie.

The fact that Frederica had barely managed to stay alive was because the woman had been aiming only for her abdomen.

"However, I do not have too much time to play. If possible, I must strip you of your limbs and go capture the girl from before. You get along so well; I think it would be nice to open you both side by side."

"Unfortunately, your benevolence does not resonate with me whatsoever—!!"

She knew the woman was toying with her— Therefore, she had

to settle this while she was still in a mood to play around.

Explosively launching off her hind legs, Frederica barreled toward the woman with speed she hadn't revealed yet. She'd hidden the transfiguration of her legs up to this point. If she sprinted seriously, Frederica could outpace the wind itself.

Approaching at breakneck speed, she would claw out the woman's vitals. Or if she could merely graze the body with her claws—

"—I believe that charging straight in is a little simple of you."

"Wha…?"

The instant she thought her bestial claws had hit their mark, the woman vanished into thin air. Slamming down hard enough to shred the carpet, Frederica then looked up to the ceiling and gaped. Having leaped straight up, the woman attached herself to the ceiling and proceeded to begin jumping from there to the corridor wall, to the ceiling again, and then to the floor, all however she pleased.

"—Damn spider woman!!"

"I was called that in the capital, too. I thought it rather rude at the time…"

Raising a voice of dismay, the woman approached from up and down, left and right. Frederica could track motion far better than the average person, but she could not even follow the woman's shadow as it flitted around in the moonlight. Then—

"—After you fall, I would appreciate you showing me what your innards look like in your current form."

The moment after she heard that whisper, Frederica resigned herself to death.

Various feelings raced through the back of her mind in the span of a single instant… They were about the Sanctuary, about her coworkers, about her pretty junior, about the people she had served, about her family. About her little brother. These—

"Oh my."

This dejected voice was accompanied by a clash that sounded like thunder.

The roar of steel colliding with steel rang out, and a shock wave shot through the corridor, cracking its windows. Then as the shock wave passed without stopping down the corridor, a single man's voice echoed through it.

"—Accordin' to the general, there's a sayin' that goes *offense is*

the best defense."

It was a low voice, yet it held irrepressible anger within. As he spoke, both his arms—or more precisely, the two silver shields covering his fists—intercepted the woman's knife, sending it bouncing back spectacularly. The force sent the woman leaping far to the rear. The man did not pursue her as he powerfully pounded the two shields together in front of his chest.

"If ya can use shields to defend and attack…that means puttin' the best offense and the best defense together, givin' the best of both worlds, huh?"

It was simple, even infantile, and furthermore, it was the sort of logic a naughty child would think of.

But the man had used that childish logic to great effect, equipping both arms with one shield each, employing them as his own weapons. The man with short, combed-back hair boldly thrust his chest out as he turned toward Frederica.

"Don't ya think so, Si—? Whoa, you're huge?!"

Instantly, the gravitas of a full-fledged warrior dissipated, and the man—nay, the boy—opened his jade eyes wide, his inner turmoil plain as he gazed at Frederica from head to toe.

"S-seriously?! Is that really you, Sis?! The Sis I know was supposed to be this smaller, thinner, gentle, and delicate li'l thing, wasn't she?! This is closer to a big bro than a big si… *Ogoah?!*"

"You should not say such rude things upon meeting someone!"

Frederica rammed her knee into the boy, who'd given her one glance before he started ranting. The single blow sent the boy to his knees. As Frederica saw him wail with a *gueh*, she noticed *it*…the white scar on his forehead.

"You're… Are you Garf?"

"Don't kick people before ya figure that out. That's how the real Frederica would…*gueh!*"

"Do not go casually addressing your older sister by name."

In the middle of moving to get up, Garfiel sank once more from a backhanded blow to the rear of his skull.

The sight made Frederica remember her younger days. Back in the Sanctuary, the siblings amused themselves not with toys but by fighting each other. With a nine-year age gap between them, Frederica's larger frame let her win handily against Garfiel. It was as if nothing had changed since then.

"No. Garf, you've grown so big…"

“Right now, hearin’ that from Sis sounds like sarcasm! I’ll have ya know, I’m definitely gettin’ bigger from here on out! Ya won’t be lookin’ down on me forever!”

“Tee-hee, let me correct myself. Your body has grown a little larger, but you remain very small inside.”

“What was that?!”

Baring his fangs, Garfiel seemed ready to fight to prove his sister wrong. Despite the timing, this exchange with her younger brother after a separation of ten years left Frederica with an almost unbelievable sense of happiness.

She’d always hoped that someday, the day would come when she could meet Garfiel outside the Sanctuary.

This was probably someone’s doing. Ram? Emilia? Or perhaps Subaru?

“Also, there was Master Otto, wasn’t there…?”

“Ha! Don’t even bother mentionin’ that bro. *The Migredo family’s bridge falls all the time.* He’s in such a tough spot, even I feel for ’im.”

Not that he was one to talk, but Otto’s face, dejected from so much being said about him, came to mind. He somehow grasped that the man had talent, but he just gave off an aura that made you want to mouth off.

“Well then, may I finally interfere with your reunion, I wonder?”

“Well, ain’t that considerate of ya to wait this long. At the rate we were goin’, I was about to forget about beatin’ your ass and just go home. I don’t like poundin’ women much, see.”

“Oh my, how kind of you.”

Interrupting the sibling conversation from another part of the corridor, the woman smiled thinly. Garfiel made a gesture toward her as if shooing away a fly. The sight made Frederica raise her eyebrows.

“Garf, underestimating that woman due to her appearance will only get you hurt.”

“Ha! When it comes down to it, the only one I treat in this world as a woman is Ram.”

“I am certain you think that sounds manly, but it would make Ram laugh out loud.”

“What’d ya say?!”

Frederica had a look of disbelief as Garfiel turned toward her

indignantly.

That instant, a pitch-black disc flew from the murderous woman's hand at incredible speed—no, this was no disc. This was a large knife spinning with incredible speed. Leaving even the sound of ripping the air trailing behind, the blade sailed toward Garfiel's head.

"Now, hold on."

A mere instant before it split his head apart, Garfiel agilely used his left arm to deflect the disc. The skillful alteration of the disc's angle sent the knife gliding straight up, making a high-pitched sound as it impaled the ceiling above.

"Me, I said I wanted to head back straightaway, ya know?"

"—Yes, and this is my reply."

Drawing a spare to replace the knife she had thrown, the woman advanced, her posture making it seem like she was crawling over the floor. Gripping the knife in a different way than the one she had hurled, the woman aimed to sever both Garfiel's ankles.

But watching the combat unfold from behind him, Frederica caught sight of another threat.

—A string attached to the hilt of the knife impaling the ceiling drew taut, pulling it straight toward the back of Garfiel's head—he couldn't even see it coming.

"Garf—" "Oh no ya don't!!"

It was a roar from none other than Garfiel that blotted out Frederica's shriek.

Garfiel howled, and he instantly moved his left hand with explosive, overwhelming force. His arm, thick and covered with golden fur, was a savage thing on a clearly different level compared with Frederica's transformation.

"I'm sendin' ya packin', bastard!!"

Surprise ran across even the assailant's eyes, and Garfiel did not let that opportunity slip.

He tilted his head in response to the blade from behind, just enough to get his vitals out of the way while prioritizing offense. With the shield on his mighty arm, he blocked the woman's blade, and a creaking sound arose as the woman was sent flying.

Letting out a painful yelp, the woman rolled. Glancing at that, Garfiel pulled the knife out of his shoulder.

"Ha! *Even without his arms, Kurgan felled his foe*, ya know! If ya think I'm shakin' in my boots over one arm, ya got another thing

coming, idiot!"

"You're the idiot!"

"Adahhh?!"

While Garfiel was celebrating his victory, his older sister angrily slammed her fist into the back of his skull.

"Fighting as if you're trying to get yourself injured… Grandmother would cry if she saw this!"

"Ugh…n-not like I care what the old hag thinks of this…"

Frederica's lecture made Garfiel look away as he excused himself. Sighing deeply at her own younger brother's attitude, Frederica was also surprised at his strength. One might even say she was moved by it.

Garfiel had studied hard over these ten years they had spent apart. And it was not Frederica alone who was moved by that strength—

"—Nicely done. Nicely done indeed. A truly active child. Quite marvelous."

Her voice shuddering with admiration, the woman stood up with blood trickling from the corner of her lips. However, the woman merrily licked it, smiling, her cheeks reddening as if enamored.

"Hey, Fre… Sis, you know this chick named Rem?"

"—? Y-yes, she is here at the mansion. I heard from Master Subaru that she is Ram's younger sister."

Garfiel's sudden shift to a completely disconnected subject left Frederica bewildered.

From the girl's external appearance, there was no doubting she was Ram's younger sister, yet she existed nowhere in Frederica's memories. The still-sleeping girl had fallen out of her recollections, as had whatever relationship she might have had with her.

"She looks like Ram?"

"Exactly like her. However, you may not use her as a substitute."

"Like I'd do some scumbag thing like that. Just wanted to check for sure—Sis, I got a favor to ask."

Cutting off his words, Garfiel continued glaring at the woman as he spoke to Frederica.

"When ya see the chance, take this Rem chick and go. Me, I'm gonna have my hands full with this one."

"Wh-what are you saying?! I will fight also! The two of us

together can…”

“I wonder. Can you, really?”

Garfiel was trying to fight alone. Frederica attempted to convince him otherwise, but the assailant’s voice interfered. Frederica sternly glared at her.

“I would rather you not make such a scary face, though. Besides, I believe your younger brother can attest that my opinion is not off the mark.”

“…Garf?”

The woman’s words brought a questioning look over Frederica’s face as she called out to her younger brother. Once she did, Garfiel spoke.

“Sorry, Sis. This ain’t some half-hearted opponent ya can take on while watchin’ out for someone behind ya.”

“Wha…?!”

“Hey, don’t misunderstand, Sis. It ain’t like I’m sayin’ you’d be in the way or anything.”

There’s no other way to take it, thought Frederica, but Garfiel kept glaring at the woman as he responded to Frederica’s dubious gaze.

“I figure if she ’n’ I get serious, the area around us is gonna take one hell of a beatin’.”

Garfiel pointed to himself and then toward the woman. The joyful smile that came over the woman seemed to agree with his words as she toyed with her long, triple-braided hair and leaned forward.

“I suppose so. I’m sure it will be so… Therefore, I think it is best that you step back.”

“

with you all day long—that was the startin' point of me becomin' the greatest."

This time, Garfiel's words truly surprised Frederica.

His tone of voice, which betrayed no consideration, no consolation, no such emotions whatsoever, set Frederica's chest ablaze, for she felt a tangible sense that her younger brother had grown in her absence.

"The general taught me the power of numbers the hard way, but unfortunately, this is where the other extreme comes into play…"

With his elder sister's gaze still on him and maintaining the brunt of his enemy's focus, Garfiel stepped forward.

"—So come get some. I'm celebratin' leavin' the Sanctuary. The party starts now and lasts till I smash apart the first wall standin' in my way!!"

3

—Let us briefly go back in time, switching to a scene where a dragon carriage was heading to Roswaal Manor.

"Okay? The people who need to be rescued in the mansion number four in total, all girls."

From the driver's seat of the dragon carriage, which was running at full speed, Subaru lifted up four fingers as he gave his explanation.

The landscape sped by as the dragon carriage took advantage of its wind repel blessing to race along a neglected road. Relying once more on the land dragon who had saved him over and over, Subaru nodded toward his fellow passengers with a dead-serious face.

"There's basically no time to spare…or rather, whatever the timing, the assassins will definitely launch their attack the moment we arrive. We've got to rescue every last one of the four."

"So for buyin' time…there's Sis, and that's about it, huh? Man, already been ten years since I've seen her face…"

Garfiel crinkled his nose, with Subaru's words leaving him in an awkward state.

He had stayed in the Sanctuary, remained there out of stubbornness for many years. No doubt he felt plenty guilty for having pegged Frederica a traitor when she had been busy trying to create a place for him in the outside world.

“Well, just gotta ask you to put that aside with a *poof* and make up real fast with a *pshaw*.”

“*Poof* and *pshaw*… General, c’mon!”

“But on a more serious note, we really must defer our complaints. That said, you truly have not spoken to her even once since the separation? According to Miss Ram, there did seem to be some comings and goings with the Sanctuary, so have you sent a letter, perhaps?”

“Me, I didn’t send any, and the ones that came… I handed ’em all to the old hag without readin’ ’em.”

As Garfiel made a pouting face, Subaru and Otto went “Ah!” and covered their faces. His attitude toward his sister was completely, 100 percent that of a child. Their reunion would surely be quite a moving thing to see.

“I am worried about Miss Frederica, but the one in the most danger would be Petra, yes?”

“Yeah, I think so. Petra is Roswaal Manor’s new maid… She’s a sharp cookie with a bright future. Special attention required.”

Subaru concurred with Otto’s opinion. As a matter of fact, Petra’s projected death rate was 100 percent unless they did something. Of course, the other three were also in peril, but in Petra’s case, her lack of combat ability was a fatal flaw.

Though, in terms of being unable to fight back, there was one other in identical danger—

“There’s Rem… Ram’s little sister. I’m sure Garfiel doesn’t remember her, though…”

“Me, I still half don’t believe it. Ya said she’s exactly like Ram, like a twin? If I’ve known her for a long time like that, would I really forget?”

He understood why Garfiel found it difficult to swallow. But the attack Rem suffered obliterated her existence, causing even her older sister, Ram, to forget her. Thinking about that made Subaru’s chest tighten as he continued.

“But there’s a silver lining to this. I’m just guessing, but Rem probably isn’t a target of the assassins. Just from the fact that they were hired…because Rem…”

Fell off the edge of the world. Subaru couldn’t bring himself to finish. Otto continued in his place.

“…However, if they find Miss Rem at the mansion, she will not escape unscathed. Is that not so?”

Otto's words made him listlessly nod. Subaru understood what he meant.

The assassins—Elsa and Meili—were not good-natured professionals. They were morally bankrupt people who thought nothing of involving innocents. Rem and the people of Earlham Village were thoroughly unsafe around them.

"We must pray that the opponent does not begin by opening the door to the room where Miss Rem sleeps… To be honest, I cannot call depending on the enemy a sound plan."

"…I'll be depending on you and the enemy both. That's Subaru Natsuki's *Reverse Fuurinkazan* tactical doctrine."

"S-so cool…!!"

Subaru couldn't deny that the conditions were pretty desperate, but Garfiel's eyes were glimmering. This all-too-fitting reaction pained his heart, but after all the current business was taken care of, he really needed to make some time and give Garfiel a lecture about real tactics taught by Sun Tzu.

And while it was fine and well to imagine a happy, peaceful future—

"I've gotta say, this has been really freaking me out hard. Is this actually helping?"

"We're in a hurry, right? Me, I ain't doin' this 'cause I wanna."

Subaru's words and oddly indecisive attitude made Garfiel clack his fangs in dismay.

Subaru understood Garfiel's point, but he wanted him to appreciate how it made others feel. After all, that moment, Garfiel was outside, leaning into the dragon carriage, participating in the conversation as he held on to the windowsill.

Under the windowsill, Garfiel was running at full speed immediately beside one of the dragon carriage's wagon wheels. The soles of his feet were pounding hard into the ground. Of course, this wasn't something he had come up with for no purpose, but…

"Look, I defeated an enemy before by dragging him into a wagon wheel, so I'm scared about accidents… If you make one false move and end up getting scattered across the countryside, I'm gonna have PTSD for sure, and then I'll be out of options for the mansion, too…"

"Wha? General, you're a worrywart, aren't ya? It's all right, sheesh. See, seeee!"

"Stop it!! You're killin' me!! I'll die before you do!!"

Garfiel started to play around while still hanging alongside, making Subaru raise a wail in complaint. The beastly boy's grip was strong enough to warp the windowsill. Even knowing there was not even a remote chance of an accident, Subaru felt it was still bad for his heart.

"Either way, Garfiel's blessing of the earth spirit has no effect unless his feet are on the ground, so let us pass this off as a necessary measure to ensure Garfiel's as close to tip-top condition as possible."

"But from the outside, this looks like we're doing our best to shake off a guy who's desperately trying to get inside the carriage. Plus we actually are dragging along a delusional fourteen-year old."

"You do realize that if anyone saw this, neither the truth nor what it seems like would save my reputation, yes?!"

Otto, holding the reins, wailed; Subaru nodded, too. It was a supremely strange sight that could get someone reported and pulled over—yet, there was meaning to Garfiel's acrobatic feat.

Emilia had used her magic to heal the wounds he'd incurred during his violent battle with Subaru and the others. However, one could not call the mana and blood inside his body that he'd lost, or other measures of endurance, fully recovered. This seemingly unjust treatment was an improvised way to supplement those things during the time they traveled between the Sanctuary and the mansion.

This was to make Garfiel's blessing of the earth spirit the trump card for their mansion strategy.

"Also, one last thing, General. We stopped the talk midway—only heard 'bout three people so far."

"—Yeah."

Garfiel lifted up his body and peered into the dragon carriage. He directed the question toward Subaru, but he also sent Otto a questioning look. Otto shook his head, though.

"Unfortunately, I have not met the final person, either. But according to what we heard from Miss Shima, she is someone in a somewhat difficult position, it would seem."

"Bro, did ya somehow make someone hate you before you even met them? You all right?"

"I'd like to believe that's not why we haven't had a chance to meet yet!"

Seeing the disquiet in Garfiel's eyes, Otto put on a desperate

look as he made his rebuttal. The noisy exchange between the pair was probably an attempt to be considerate toward Subaru.

Perhaps—yes, most likely, they were trying to discuss a topic that was difficult for him to talk about.

"The last person…is Beatrice. I have to be the one to bring her out."

Turning toward the pair, Subaru did not use the timid word *probably*.

It was unthinkable to even say it out loud before he acted. He *would* bring her out. And Subaru had to be the one to do it— Upon learning of her past, that was what Subaru had firmly decided.

"I'll bring Beatrice out. I'll drag her out. I have to do it."

It was none other than Subaru who absolutely had to be the one.

Even if Beatrice refused it, even if she acted like she didn't want it…

"If that's what the general says, that's how it's gonna be."

"We really must deftly evacuate the nearby villagers, too, to avoid unforeseen circumstances. I suppose it would be best if I was in charge of this."

Presented with Subaru's resolve, Garfiel and Otto promised their own cooperation.

Subaru had his role to play. And they had roles of their own.

Geez. I have two seriously dependable people on my side…

"Thanks, you pair of idiots."

"You are truly incapable of giving even simple thanks, you single idiot!!"

4

—The thick musk of old books emanated from the other side of the opened door.

Perhaps this odor had accumulated from the long days and months the books had spent in this place. Or if he could believe that it was a room where time had stopped, the passage of days and months had nothing to do with it at all.

"The Sanctuary made me think of a lot of little things like that. As the librarian, what do you think?"

"—Why…?"

Without permission from the custodian of the room, Subaru

bluntly stepped into the archive.

Just like usual, there was an atmosphere equal parts tranquil and gloomy. There were no glass windows to let in rays of sunlight or even the smallest of shutters for ventilation. Staying for any length of time would dampen his spirits and most certainly be bad for his heart.

That was probably why Subaru had always wanted to bring the girl out of this place.

"…Why have you come here, I wonder? I do not remember inviting you."

"Sorry, but I'm a man who shows up whether he's been invited or not. Back in middle school, I popped up at a classmate's birthday party uninvited. Can't forget how awkward that was at the time."

Naturally, even Subaru had endeavored to pay more heed to the atmosphere after an experience like that. But of course, he was the most boisterous of anyone that day by far, and no one ever invited him to a birthday thereafter.

"That actually hurt me so much that it was almost like my chest got cut open, so I'll set that story aside for another time."

"This time or next, will you begin speaking of it whenever it pleases you, I wonder…? You are an arbitrary man in every respect."

"Yeah, I am. That's why I came here whether you like it or not."

He knew that the girl before him had drawn in her breath.

With a theatrical gesture, Subaru bowed, seemingly to work himself into the girl's blue eyes.

And then—

"I'm getting you out of here, Beatrice— This time, my hand's gonna lead you right out under the big ol' sun, and we'll play around until that dress is totally black from mud."

Faced with Subaru's provocative words, the girl—Beatrice—remained seated on the same stool as she always did, clutching her own book.

With those arms still wrapped tight around her black-bound book, she stared at Subaru, trembling.

< END >

AFTERWORD

Hey there! It's your author with two faces, Tappei Nagatsuki, the Mouse-Colored Cat!

Thank you very much for sticking with me one more time through *Re:ZERO*, Volume 14! Who was the author who said, *Seems like Volume 14 will have three pages left for the afterword*?!

It's been creaking along like that, same as usual!

Just as I said in the previous volume, the issues of the past were the focus this time around. Some characters have undergone dramatic changes from the past to the present; some have not changed at all for good or for ill, and this tale of the past came out just right!

Either way, as you probably guessed, we're finally reaching the climax of Arc 4! By all means, wait with bated breath to enjoy the story's conclusion, with events in two places—the Sanctuary and Roswaal Manor—running in parallel!

Speaking of enjoyment, the illustration book, which assembles Shinichirou Otsuka's work on *Re:ZERO*, goes on sale at the same time as this volume! As this is a special compilation of first-printing store exclusives and has an original novella included, the illustrations and the story should be tons of fun! I encourage everyone to buy both!

And now, it's that time again. In other words, it's time for the customary thanks. This time, a lot of people helped me out.

Editor I, this is a comment I make every volume, but Volume 14

was quite an ordeal! I feel like there won't ever be another volume that will be as difficult as this one, but please continue to let me call you in the dead of night in the future as well. Thank you very much!

To Shinichirou Otsuka, the illustrator, thank you for your continued hard work even though Volume 14 had so many new characters who needed to be drawn! Thanks to you, the antagonists really look the part, and a certain man's tragedy has a grandness and incomparable impact. I'm very grateful! Plus, with the collection book going on sale alongside Volume 14, you must have worked so, so much. When I look at all the designs you've whipped up, it seriously makes my brain shudder… Er, I mean it makes my heart tremble! Please sign my copy!

To Kusano, the cover designer, of all the covers so far, this volume's is the single happiest one of them all. You have produced a masterpiece. I also say this every volume, but thank you very much for enduring the usual trial and error!

It's also so good to have Daichi Matsuse and Makoto Fugetsu keep handling the manga editions! After all, the production of new anime content has been decided! I'll be relying on both of you for your support from here on out as well. Ohhh, I'm so grateful! Thank you, thank you! (Decided completely on my own.)

This is a bit of a sudden topic change, but since it was decided that a new anime episode would be produced, I'm indebted once again to everyone related to the anime team! I really am honored, so thank you very much!

Beyond that, thank you as always to everyone at the MF Bunko J editorial department and everyone else involved, including all the bookstore employees and distributors!

It's truly thanks to everyone involved in this endeavor that I have been able to continue writing while *wanting* to write. I'm writing up a storm and still having fun!

And of course, all this is thanks to you readers who have read this book to the end, even reading the afterword. All of you have my greatest gratitude. Thanks as always!

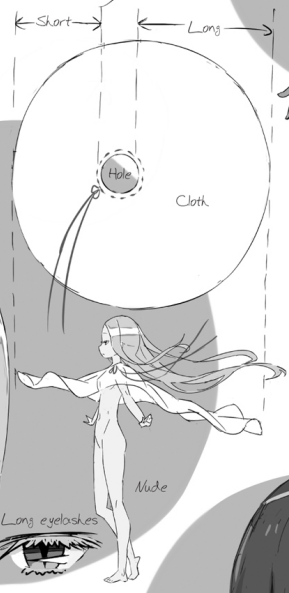
Well then, see you next time for Volume 15. The part that I wanted to write the most in Arc 4 is coming!

August 2017 < < The refreshing summer has ended! With passion and energy that won't lose out to the summer heat…! > >

CHARACTER DESIGN

Hector's Design

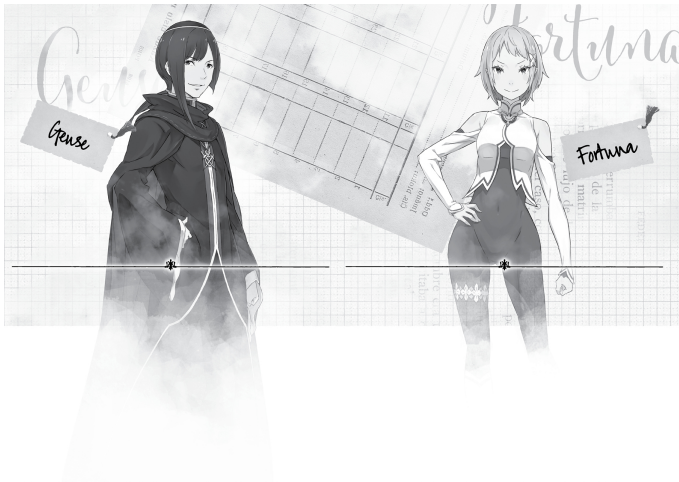
Pandora's Design



Geuse

Initial design

Drew him to look about eighteen.



“I humbly accept this great duty… Furthermore, I have been commanded to undertake it alongside Lady Fortuna. I am so unworthy of this honor that it makes my very knees tremble.”

“Oh, don’t make it into such a big thing. Or did you mean that you don’t like being with me?”

“Absolutely not! If anything, because it is you, Lady Fortuna, I tremble in terror that you might be dissatisfied with this arrangement in some way!”

“Me, have a problem with you, Geuse? Of course I wouldn’t. Hey, we know neither one of us has a problem with this, right? With that out of the way, let’s wrap this job up quickly and go pick up Emilia.”

“…Yes! I suppose you are right. Let us do just that. Well then, the content to be introduced this time around begins with information on books. After this current volume, *Re:ZERO* Volume 15 is scheduled to be published in December, but behold, the third short-story compilation is also going on sale in December!”

“This is the third compilation of all the *Re:ZERO* short stories serialized in *Monthly Comic Alive*, yes? Can you really put them both out in the same month?”

“There is no problem. What is most surprising about the third compilation is that Makoto Fugetsu, who worked on the manga version of Arc 2, is in charge of the illustrations! It shall be most

enjoyable to have a taste of a different *Re:ZERO* artist!"

"Well, that certainly is most surprising. But it sounds *really* fun. I'm sure Emilia will be delighted."

"I am certain the exploits of the grown-up Lady Emilia are also recorded within. Surely, she has grown to be beautiful and wise and a courteous and graceful woman."

"I wonder…? It's true she's the cutest in the world, but as for growing up into a girl who possesses grace and intellect…"

"Also, there is tremendous information beyond the matter of books! The *Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-* anime was rated quite highly…and now it has been decided that a new episode shall be produced!"

"Yes! This is a *really* important announcement. A PV for the new episode was even screened at the MF Bunko J Summer School Festival! Once again, you can see Emilia… I mean, you can see all the characters of *Re:ZERO* move and speak. Do check the official *Re:ZERO* home page and Twitter for all the details. Please and thank you."

"With new books and a fresh anime episode, *Re:ZERO* developments continue to be so captivating that I cannot tear my eyes away. Everyone related to the franchise is truly diligent!"

"Yes, diligent… Though that's an odd way of putting it. What is with you all of a sudden?"

"Uh, er, yes, why did I suddenly say something like that just now…?"

"Perhaps you're simply tired. Anyway, the announcements are over! Now, how about we head over to Emilia? If you meet her, it should perk you up a little."

"…Ha-ha, I suppose I shall. Yes, let us do just that! I must not show Lady Emilia a beleaguered face. Well then, let us be off, Lady Fortuna."

"…If it's going to be like that, I'm going to end up a tiny bit jealous of Emilia. Sheesh…!"

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